Adapting to change: Building learning spaces in a culturally responsive manner

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Abstract

Many other European countries, Finland received a fast-growing number of asylum seekers in 2015, and the subject of the resettlement of unaccompanied minors came under the limelight. This study analyses the experience of receiving a group of unaccompanied minors in a lower secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area. To help the asylum seekers adapt, the school established new teaching groups and other support mechanisms in cooperation with the asylum centre on short notice. The key actors in the process included the school leadership, the parents, pupils, preparatory class teachers and the Home Economics teacher, who were supported by a researcher from the university. The data collected throughout the process include emails, meeting minutes, participant observations, a blog and photographs. Qualitative content analysis of the material focuses on the planning and implementing of the Activity Evenings project that was organised collaboratively in the school’s Home Economics class. The findings suggest that the evenings served as an important space for the newly arrived asylum-seeking students and other students, teachers and parents to build the ground for preparatory education for the immigrants as part of the school’s regular programme and for further developing a culturally responsive, multicultural school community.

**KEYWORDS:** Minor asylum seekers, Learning space, Home Economics education, Cultural responsiveness, Action research

Introduction

This research was conducted in 2015, when Finland, like the rest of Europe, faced an influx of asylum seekers—32,500 refugees, mainly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Albania—compared to 3,651 in the previous year (Ministry of the Interior, 2017). In 2016, Finland granted asylum to 1,570 unaccompanied minors (Finnish Immigration Service Statistics, 2017). The activities and research in this article were conducted during a period of heated public discourse on immigration. There was tension between those who were for helping asylum seekers and those who were opposed to immigration. At times, the social media discussions became heavily polarised, and many demonstrations took place against and in favour of immigration. In this research, we had the chance...
to follow up on how all this played out in daily life at a school where a group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers had been placed on short notice. The purpose of this collaborative action research study was to establish practices for receiving new minor asylum seekers at school and to prepare the school community for the changing situation. We were interested in developing ways to strengthen the increasingly multicultural school community and to further develop culturally responsive pedagogies and home/school collaborations.

**Role of school and community in the adaptation of minor asylum seekers**

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are the most vulnerable group of immigrant children (Oppedal & Idsæe, 2015). Constructing supportive networks and developing culture competence have been identified as keys to the adaptation process of minor asylum seekers (Oppedal & Idsæe, 2015). Keles Friberg, IIdsæe, Sirin, and Oppedal (2016) similarly highlighted the importance of respectful intergroup relationships in schools and communities in the development of social and cultural competences and healthy adjustment trajectories in minor asylum seekers. In addition, both friends from the home culture and friends from the majority culture play a critical role in the adaptation process (Oppedal & IIdsæe, 2015).

The school’s role in the adaptation of minor asylum seekers is an area that needs further attention. The often interrupted and fragmented educational paths of asylum-seeking youth pose a challenge to their adjustment to structured education in the new host country (Spiteri, 2015). The immigrant youth studied by Spiteri (2015) in Malta perceived school as an element of stability in their otherwise unpredictable lives. Further, the extensive study conducted in Norway by Oppedal and IIdsæe (2016) recommended the facilitation of participation in culturally diverse peer networks, which include youth from the host country, as an important domain of intervention to support minor asylum seekers. In the context of Finland, Björklund (2015) found that newly arrived young people had very limited contact with the local youth, as a result of which their social adaptation was highly dependent on professionals, including teachers, caretakers and social workers. Schools could potentially serve as spaces to create networks with the majority youth, but more needs be done to actively create opportunities for inter-group engagement.

Learning occurs in a space—both physical and virtual—that brings people together and encourages exploration, collaboration and discussion; alternatively, the space can also create an atmosphere of silence and disconnectedness (Oblinger, 2006). As learning is a social process, a community—a group of people with a common purpose, shared values, and similar goals—plays an important role in learning. A real community can be considered to exist only when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and leads to learning. Learning spaces that foster connections rather than compartmentalisation are thus needed in Home Economics education (Malin, 2011). In this regard, Bickford and Wright (2006) have proposed several steps for engaging a community in co-creation: inviting stakeholders to participate, selecting a talented leader, understanding and appreciating differences in perspective, eliminating roadblocks to community learning, and finally, maintaining a balance between patience and performance.

**Home/school linkages in multicultural schools**

At the time of this research, the renewal process of the national basic education core curriculum (FNBE, 2016) had been finalised. The reforms not only create new and interesting avenues for the culture of practice in schools, but also challenge teachers to extend the learning space beyond the school walls. Thus, the learning environments and work methods should be developed with the aim of encouraging secure and inspiring learning. The new national basic education curriculum emphasises on strengthening home/school linkages to support quality learning. These linkages have been found to be critical to implementing culturally responsive education in increasingly diverse schools (Gay, 2010; Gilhooly, 2015; Hue & Kennedy, 2012).

One year before the new national basic education core curriculum was launched, new legislation on pupil and student welfare (Finlex, 2013) came into effect. According to the new legislation, parents and guardians need to play an active role in the pupil’s welfare services. The legislation now places more emphasis on preventive welfare and collaborative welfare practices. In practice, parent/school interaction has become increasingly challenging at upper levels of schooling. Too often, teachers find themselves contacting parents and guardians only when there is a problem.
Finnish lower secondary schools, where the learners are adolescents (age 13 to 17 years), are trying to find new ways to establish fruitful home/school interaction to enhance parents’ participation. According to a recent survey conducted by the Finnish Parents’ League (Vanhempien barometri, 2015), parents considered their participation quite limited, and they wished for alternative forms of participation beyond the usual fundraising-focused activities of schools’ parental associations. In addition, the increasingly diverse home cultures of students also pose a challenge to schools with regard to developing new ways of parent/teacher interaction to support children’s learning and creating a mutual understanding between the school and the home. In Warsame’s study (2010) on the home/school relations of Somali families in Finland, the critical role of genuine intercultural dialogue became evident in overcoming prejudices, generalisations and marginalisation.

In the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, home needs to be understood in a specific way. In Finland, some minor youth are placed in private homes, but a majority live in small institutions run by the central government during the asylum process and institutions run by the municipality after they are granted a residence permit. Therefore, the social workers and care takers, along with their peers, can be considered as their daily family or home. Björklund (2015) contended that while unaccompanied minor youth in Finland receive the support of various professionals, no one is assigned the role of a parent; that is, there is no one who would be able to provide holistic support. However, previous research on minor asylum seekers from Norway (Oppedal & Idsæe, 2015; Keles et al., 2016) and Malta (Spiteri, 2015) suggests that a great majority of unaccompanied youth do manage to maintain contact with their families at home and receive some amount of emotional and social support from them.

Gilhooly’s (2015) study of immigrant youth from Myanmar in the USA emphasised that awareness among immigrant students about their own identities and sufficient knowledge about people’s backgrounds are prerequisites for successful culturally responsive teaching. Similarly, in Spiteri’s (2015) study on asylum-seeking youth in Malta, it was recommended that teachers be informed about their students’ home cultures and spread the information to the home students. Gilhooly (2015) suggests that students’ and their families’ funds of knowledge could become a resource to support learning. His findings also point to the importance of the entire immigrant community in terms of supporting the learning of immigrant pupils, who face cultural and linguistic challenges in a new environment.

**Culturally responsive education within the Home Economics context**

In this article, we use the notion of cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2013) to analyse the various dimensions of a learning space that are conducive for creating intercultural connections. Culturally responsive education addresses the learner in a comprehensive way through multi-dimensional engagement in learning activities. According to Wenger’s (1999) social theory of learning, we consider learning as an experience, as doing, as belonging and as becoming. The focus of this theory is on the process of being an active participant in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities.

Creating meaningful connections between learners’ home and school cultures is a central aim of culturally responsive teaching. For immigrant students, culturally responsive teaching can reduce the stress and anxiety associated with continually crossing cultural borders between home and school (Gay, 2013). According to Gay (2013), culturally responsive teaching should (a) connect in-school learning to out-of-school living, (b) promote educational equity and excellence, (c) create a community that includes individuals from different backgrounds, and (d) develop students’ agency, efficacy and empowerment.

Home Economics as a school subject provides opportunities for culturally responsive teaching through its strong link to students’ everyday lives and its orientation to activity and interaction (Janhonen-Abruquah & Påljojoki, 2005). According to Venäläinen (2010), the use of multiple tools, collaboration and peer work by teachers and their ability to connect their teaching with immigrant students’ everyday lives are the key elements of successful multicultural Home Economics education. In addition, analyses of gender discourses by Home Economics university students in Finland and Ghana (Janhonen-Abruquah, Posti-Ahokas, Edjah, & Amu, 2017) pointed to the importance of a contextual understanding of gender that can be used as a basis of discussions for enhancing gender awareness and changing practices in Home Economics-related contexts.
The Home Economics classroom, as a physical space, is designed for hands-on activities and technical solutions for food preparation and household maintenance activities. However, architectural design can hinder collaborative learning (Malin, 2011), and Home Economics classrooms as gendered spaces force pupils to adopt various roles (Pettersson, 2007) before they are able to learn properly. However, despite these shortcomings, the Home Economics classroom has its advantages, especially with regard to building a collaborative learning community. In particular, its resemblance of a real-life home provides students with a sense of safety and familiarity. However, Home Economics classrooms probably mirror the majority culture and tradition more than any other classroom, and this could be a challenge for learners from diverse backgrounds.

Collaborative action research to strengthen home/school linkages and cultural responsiveness

Action research draws from pragmatism and is based on the belief that knowledge comes from doing (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2003). It is a democratic, participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). It brings together action and reflection, and theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. Working collaboratively leads not only to changes in communities and organisations, but also to personal changes in the action researcher. As action researchers reflect on their experiences, they acknowledge being profoundly changed by those experiences (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2003).

The importance of action research in developing Home Economics education so that it related better to the diverse, changing everyday lives of students was demonstrated in a two-year action research that was conducted with the aim of developing participatory methods for change in Danish schools (Benn, 2010). Additionally, a study by Janhonen-Abruquah et al. (2014) explored a process of developing and testing learning games to enhance intercultural dialogue in Home Economics classes. With the help of an action research-informed approach, they were able to develop tools for intercultural Home Economics education.

For this study, action research was chosen for its ability to engage practitioners and researchers in a collaborative process to renew practices. The existing links between the school and the university enabled the inclusion of a research component after the school had received external project funding for promoting equality.

Research context and participants

The present action research was conducted over one school year (2015-2016) at a lower secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In 2015, the school had 300 of its own lower secondary school pupils and an additional 300 primary school pupils temporarily studying in the same premises. Out of the 300 pupils, 30 had a home language other than Finnish or Swedish. In November 2015, two preparatory classes that hosted 24 pupils were introduced in an NGO premises nearby. In January 2016, the preparatory classes were moved to the school’s premises. At that time, there were three classes of 36 pupils in total, all of whom were boys. At the same time, the primary school was moved out to its own school building, which freed a physical space in the school building itself. The number of preparatory class pupils increased rather fast, which meant that the school administration had to make some quick decisions about their schooling. Only two brothers who attended the preparatory class had come to Finland with their parents, while all the other boys had arrived in Finland alone. Staff and pupils donated school bags, school accessories, winter boots and warm hats, and teachers knitted woolly socks for the immigrant boys. The preparatory class had a strong focus on art and skill-oriented subjects. A Home Economics teacher was hired to teach the preparatory class pupils. The classes were planned according to the city curriculum for basic education and its section on preparatory classes, which emphasised on Finnish as a second language in teaching. The main aim of these classes is to ease the domiciling process and ensure the students meet the adequate prerequisites for joining mainstream classes.

This collaborative action research was carried out in a culturally diverse group consisting of pupils, parents, teachers, student-teachers and a researcher. A second researcher joined the team during the analysis stage. The number of actors and their key roles and responsibilities are summarised in Table 1.
As seen in Table 1, over 40 people were engaged in the activities in various roles. At the school level, the activities were led by the school principal and the Home Economics teacher. The preparatory class teachers and teaching assistants served as mediators between students, parents and teachers. The researcher and two student-teachers from the university supported the process both practically and analytically. The collaborative action research team was formed by the researchers, the Home Economics teacher and the school principal. The other actors can be defined as active respondents (Fielding, 2001) who engaged in discussions on the process that influenced the research direction, as explained later. The following sections of the article describe the process and the participants’ changing roles in more detail.

Steps of the action research process

The collective commitment to investigate an issue (McIntyre, 2008) arose as the entire school, including parents, were facing a new situation in the form of a group of young asylum-seeking boys who had newly arrived at the school. The principal of the school also felt the need to engage in self- and collective reflection to make sense of the new situation. This led to a joint decision to engage in individual and collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved and helps build alliances between researchers and participants, altogether over 40, for the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the solution (McIntyre, 2008). The process is summarised in Figure 1. In the following section, excerpts from the data selected by the research team are used to describe the experiences, feelings and decisions of the team at different stages of the process.
Step 1. Planning: Seeking funding and arranging meetings

The process was initiated in May 2015 when the principal submitted an application for equality project funding to the Ministry of Education. The school received the funding, and in the beginning of the autumn semester, the principal presented the idea to the school staff. The funding was primarily assigned to activities to enhance school/home collaboration. At that time, the school’s Home Economics teacher, who was actively engaged in the project planning, contacted Home Economics teacher educators at the University of Helsinki to identify opportunities to involve a research component in the project.

This adds to the workload and...so it does feel a little tiring and like something extra. But it is so interesting!
(A text message from the Home Economics teacher to the researcher)

The initial plans to open an afternoon coffee shop run by parents were not successful. Moreover, attempts to engage university students as co-researchers in the process were not realised either. In the autumn of 2015, the school was asked to prepare to receive 36 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and to integrate them into the school community. The youth had arrived in Finland in October, and teachers from the school had started teaching them in the reception centre. The reception centre was established by an NGO, particularly for this group of youth, in the school’s catchment area, where very few immigrants reside in general. The school leadership, facing a new situation, took active initiatives to involve parents and some external actors to create activities for the whole community in order to enhance collaboration with the asylum-seeking students and other students and to create practices for home/school collaboration to support the integration of the new students and the appreciation of cultural diversity. The following email was sent by the school principal and the Home Economics teacher to all parents:

Our school is becoming more multicultural.

Our school is strongly multicultural and through opening two preparatory classes for immigrant students last week, we have even more nationalities present.

We are approaching you guardians to discuss multiculturalism in our school. We have received equality project funding for this purpose and are inviting you to discuss and share ideas over coffee to see how we could support our newly arrived students and ‘old’ students to collaborate. What could the homes and the school do to help the new pupils to adapt and to increase the appreciation of different kinds of cultures?

Home Economics is a popular subject in our schools; thus, we wonder whether we could spread cultural awareness through this subject. However, all ideas related to other subjects and school activities are welcome. Thinking about these together at this point would be very enjoyable...

Sixteen parents, 15 females and one male, attended the first parents’ meeting arranged in December 2015. The principal informed the participants that the new asylum-seeking pupils were to start studying at the school. The two preparatory class teachers of the asylum-seeking pupils, the Home Economics teacher and the researcher from the University of Helsinki, also participated in the meeting. The following quotes from the parents are from the discussion conducted during the meeting:

We are indeed facing a big change. Then ‘they’ become friends of our children and they start visiting our homes like other friends. I wish I could come to this school.

My son cannot imagine what it feels like to arrive alone in a country where you don’t know anyone and without knowing the language. He said he’d rather die.

The atmosphere was generally very positive, and new asylum-seeking pupils were welcomed by the parents. The parents also openly expressed their worries and concerns about the new situation. One parent immediately expressed willingness to volunteer in supporting the learning of the new students. The teachers of the students who at that time taught them at the reception centre talked about the students. One of them said, “I wish you could see these boys”, to indicate that there was nothing to worry about. One of the parents who is a teacher in a more diverse school stated that multiculturalism is part of everyday life in some other parts of Helsinki: “You no longer see it, and it is good that this particular residential area receives more immigrants.”
During the discussion, the idea of the activity evenings—cooking and eating together—took place. The idea was that the new and old pupils of the school, along with the parents, would cook and bake in the Home Economics classroom. A plan for action was made, and the time of the next meeting set.

The second planning meeting took place in February 2016. Parents, pupils (both asylum seekers and others) and the school staff took part in planning the activity evenings. The recipes were selected by both pupils and parents. The teachers purchased the groceries, and the parents agreed to bring some of the food required for preparing specialties from certain cultures.

I wish I could have video recorded the event! Even though there were only four guardians present (and one apparently in a wrong place—thinking of having come to the school trip planning meeting), the evening was overwhelmingly joyful! Two of my 7th grade students, one with family from Estonia and one whose mother is from an Eastern European country (the mother was also present) and seven pupils from the preparatory class (from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria) were all present. The mixture of cultures was amazing! (Message from the Home Economics teacher to the researcher, who was unable to attend the meeting)

Step 2. Acting: Activity Evenings

The first Activity Evening took place in March 2016, and the second in April 2016. The participants at both activity evenings were parents, asylum-seeking students, the school pupils and teachers. Two Home Economics student-teachers took part in the second Activity Evening as part of their teaching practice. The difference between the two evenings was only the number of participants.

The first evening was run at two separate Home Economics classrooms simultaneously, because over 30 participants were present. The preparatory class teachers helped the Home Economics teacher with the grocery purchases. All the ingredients were arranged in separate boxes to make the food preparation easy. It also helped with the forming of groups. Eight groups of four to five persons each were formed, representing diverse cultural backgrounds. The recipes were chosen to represent the cultures of the participants, and the culture experts taught the others how to cook or bake the food. The atmosphere was cheerful and very friendly. The dinner tables were set in both classrooms, as there was no space for one big table. The moment when everything was ready and the participants were gathered around the table was the most fruitful for cultural exchange. The food was a safe theme for discussion, even though there was no common language. English was the language that was mostly used.

The Home Economics teacher who organised the evening was rather exhausted from the preparations. Before the first Activity Evening, she sent the following text message to the researcher:

I've worked like crazy to make tomorrow successful and I'm quite tired and contemplating whether to organise the second evening or not.

After the first evening, the researcher received this text message from the Home Economics teacher:

Hi! Everything went really well... The second evening will not be organised. It is good to stop with this successful experience. This is a good framework.

The second evening was arranged because the pupils made several requests for it and there was still funding available. It followed the same pattern as the first one, except that the working space was changed. The first evening was arranged in two separate classrooms, but the second one was arranged so that everyone was in the same room and could participate together in the conversation and observe others. At that time, two Student-teachers were doing their teaching practice at the school and were very enthusiastic about participating and helping the Home Economics teacher. Although the Home Economics teacher reported that the process was exhausting, she emphasised the value of working together and particularly appreciated the discussion over the dining table after everything was cooked.

We can learn a lot of new things around food! Thank you for everyone who participated, particularly the pupils and mothers who taught food preparation, and to all enthusiastic cooks! Together we created a lot of memories and tasty food. (Extract from a blog post by the Home Economics teacher in the school’s blog)
Step 3. Observation

Throughout the planning and acting steps, the events were systematically documented and the data collected, which include photographs, a blog, emails, text messages, the school homepage, minutes of the PTA meetings, the principal’s letter to all the parents, the funding application and participants’ observation notes. All the data were compiled by the researchers in electronic files that were shared with the action research team. The data are organised and summarised in a matrix (Table 2), which provides the time, type of data, core content, the actors involved, the challenges, resources for the information, and the researchers’ specific comments.

Table 2 Excerpt from the matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Parents’ first meeting in January 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of data</td>
<td>Participant observation notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core content</td>
<td>The principal opened the discussion and chaired it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Mothers, fathers, principal, teacher as researcher, researcher, preparatory class teacher, welfare officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>How to attract parents to attend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How to find a suitable time for the next planning meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Equality project funding provided by the Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s interpretation</td>
<td>I sensed some anxiety and concern amongst parents about the changing situation at the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The principal was calm and confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The parents were eager to share ideas, and were active and talkative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The atmosphere was positive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4. Reflection

The process of organising and analysing the data gathered is the final stage of the action research cycle. Reflective discussions during the process amongst various stakeholders were carried out. These were both informal discussions that took place during and after each planning and action step and more formal ones based on the documents gathered during the process. A SWOT analysis (Väyrynen, 2010) was conducted to identify the successes of the process and to identify areas that need further
attention. Strengths and weaknesses are internal factors, whereas opportunities and threats are external factors. The results of the SWOT analysis helped focus on the process and identify critical points during each step of the action research. The findings of the SWOT analysis also guided qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2007) of the data. The manifold data obtained from photographs to official documents, and from phone call transcripts to blog texts, posed some challenges for the analyses. The ability to combine different types of data was important for gaining a holistic picture of the project. The different types of data also brought valuable depth to the analysis process.

One of the main strengths of this project was the enthusiastic staff, who helped pull the project through. The team was also rather multi-professional and involved actors from outside of the school. Similar to Gay’s (2013) culturally responsive teaching study, the project created a community comprising individuals from different backgrounds. The encouraging school spirit was the starting point for the project. As seen above, the meetings and activity evenings created spaces for forward-looking, positive interaction and joint activity. A project such as this is an invaluable attempt to build bridges between the former county of origin and new host culture, as asylum seekers experience many challenges (Björklund, 2015) in the new home country. The school staff also had a scientific orientation with regard to school practices. In addition, they had the courage to intuitively try out new practices and to involve actors from the university in the process.

One of the weaknesses of this project was that the school had no prior experience working with asylum-seeking pupils, as a result of which the project was dependent on one or two key persons and the interest of new preparatory class teachers. Moreover, the project was not planned in detail, but it started out quite open and grew on its own and evolved during the process. In addition, at the end of the school year, the extent to which the activities had an impact on the regular school practices was unclear.

There were several opportunities that eased the process. Extra funding provided by the Ministry of Education was needed to launch the project, and this turned out to be quite an important motivator. In this project, the sudden influx of asylum seekers was an opportunity for research, as the new situation had the entire community on its toes and created positive anxiety. The parents’ enthusiastic participation and input were invaluable for the project.

There were several threats, such as the fear that some negative experiences would change the overall attitude in the school or that the school’s inexperience in dealing with the new situation might be a problem. Luckily, these fears were not realised. The activities were funded through an extra budgetary project, as it might have not been possible to sustain the activities through the school’s regular budget.

To summarise, the school’s response to the unexpected was innovative. In particular, inviting all the parents and pupils to engage in the activities extended the space for home/school collaboration beyond the regular channels of communication with individual homes or through the parents’ association. The previously acquired, yet unspent project funding for enhancing equality enabled the funding of the extra-curricular activities for students and their parents, to support the new students’ integration into the school community. However, the process was heavily dependent on participants’ own time, resources and intrinsic motivation. Although no formal feedback was gathered from pupils and parents, their active participation and enthusiasm indicate that the process was meaningful for all the actors involved.

**Discussion**

The changes in school legislation and national curricula combined with an influx of asylum seekers have created an interesting change in momentum in Finnish society. The situation has provided an opportunity for a new kind of parent/school collaboration and provided a renewed frame for school/home cooperation, and this was the subject of study in a lower secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The action research approach was chosen as it is a useful tool for developing practitioners’ own practice in a systematic manner. Further, the bottom-up approach for creating institutional or individual change (Cammarota & Romero, 2009) was used. As this approach focuses more on individual change, in the present research, the process was viewed mainly through one teacher’s experiences. In addition, action research proceeds through small steps that can be observed.
Using a participatory approach makes the process inclusive and open, as it involves the people who are being acted upon and observed (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2003). Changing the culture of practice in any school requires changes in the roles of pupils, staff and parents. During the current project, a comprehensive learning space was built through genuine co-planning and a shared interest in the joint project. A change in professional roles was seen. The school staff provided space for others to work within the school and within the classrooms. The teacher stepped down from her leading role and acted more as a general support person. This allowed students’ and families’ funds of knowledge to be used as a resource for supporting learning (Gilhooly, 2015). Thus, recognising the trans-national family connections of minor asylum seekers could also provide opportunities for meaningful learning.

The Home Economics classroom provided the physical space for collaborative activities, including food preparation and eating together. However, what was more important than the activity itself was the interaction during the meetings and the activity evenings. Preparing and eating exotic foods is probably too naive a way of dealing with cultural differences, but it is a starting point for learning. Cooking does not increase cultural awareness, but may act as a mediator. Moreover, the power of working together should not be underestimated. The vigour of practical activities in children’s upbringing and in education has interested researchers both from the pragmatic theoretical (e.g., Hickman & Alexander, 1998) and experiential learning (e.g., Kolb, 2015) point of view. Home Economics science researchers have also attempted to demonstrate the power of practical activities in education. Haverinen and Martikainen (2004) described an atmosphere of care in family interaction, focuses on the way of being together, tone of conversation and emotional climate. Their findings showed that an atmosphere of care was built by paying attention to one another’s needs in practical activities and balancing between freedom and boundaries, and also through creating experiences for a sense of community. In particular, dialogical interaction was the point of reference when constructing an atmosphere of care. Although the present research was conducted in the school setting, one can see a parallel attempt to build dialogical interaction.

For the future of the project, a written document, guidebook, manual or even this article would help not only to record the activities, but also as a platform for developing the next phase. The research orientation of the school principal and the Home Economics teacher is a good indicator that there will be follow-up studies. This type of activity ought to be built into regular school work, teaching and parent/teacher cooperation. Further, the work that the staff does should be included in the teachers’ working hours and in the school curricula. Co-operation with various non-governmental organisations such as parents’ associations, Home Economics teachers’ association and other teacher associations is necessary to disseminate the outcomes. In addition, spreading the findings to others and learning from the good practices are crucial.

Biographies

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