In teachers we trust – or do we? A nexus analytic study of a teacher’s role as a trustee

Keywords: health education, multiliteracies, nexus analysis, teaching, trust

Abstract
This study contributes to pedagogical discussion on how to promote multiliteracy skills of adolescents in fluid media environments. In today’s world, manifold information is easily accessible, through various channels. Evaluating the credibility of information may often be challenging. Specifically, children and adolescents may find it difficult to know what to believe and who to trust, for instance, in health and well-being communication. According to Patrick Wilson (1983, 13) we only know about the world what we have experienced ourselves, or what we have heard from others. We evaluate the credibility of information, for example, based on the author and the publisher (Rieh 2005) which, in turn, effects to our thinking. Information sources, which we choose to rely on, are our cognitive authorities. Cognitive authorities influence our thinking, because we sense them trustworthy and believable. (Wilson 1983, 14.) It is noteworthy that cognitive authorities can bear factually right or wrong information; it can equally be true or false, thus critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren 1993) skills are needed.

This multidisciplinary study is conducted in the school environment utilizing perspectives of educational sciences and information studies to health communication and teaching. I examine a teacher role in health education in schools from the perspective of multiliteracies with emphasis on information seeking and evaluation skills. In Finland, health education has been included in the national core curriculum for basic education as an independent subject in Grades 7-9 since 2001. Health education in schools aims to enhance students’ skills in different areas of health literacy (FNBE 2016). According to Nutbeam (2008), health literacy can be taught in schools thus making it a measurable outcome to health education. The concept of multiliteracies, in turn, indicates literacy skills, which are needed in the interpretation of a wide range of communication channels and media as well as culturally and linguistically diverse texts (The New London Group 1996; Cope & Kalantzis 2009). Multiliteracies in FNBE (2016) refers to the ability to explicate, produce and evaluate different texts. Along with multiliteracy practices, teachers’ traditional work is transforming from teacher-centered learning event towards learner community, where teachers may equally participate in reflecting, knowledge building and meaning making processes together with students (Giroux 1988; Suoranta 2005; Freire 1998).

Teachers in their new role still have an crucial significance in giving guidance for adolescents in information evaluation and assessing cognitive authorities (Wilson 1983) despite the strong influence of peers and media. A trustful relationship between a teacher and a student is based on the true, open-minded communication (Freire 1970, 2000, 91). In the school environment, trust has an essential role in improving student achievements, and collective trust relates positively to educational outcomes (Van Maele, Van Houtte & Forsyth 2014). According to Rousseau et al. (1998), trust is an underlying psychological state that is composed of positive expectations in the functions of the trusted persons, that is, trustees. Trustees are people, who often act as a kind of authorities as they are able to provide both trustworthiness and expertise in information evaluation and establishing credibility (Jessen & Jørgensen, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to examine the teacher’s role as a trustee by analyzing the observation data, which were collected in three schools during health education lessons. The aim is to enlighten teachers’ actions in the teamwork situations, and the discussions between the teacher and the students. By exploring these discourses profoundly, I ask:
1. How is teacher’s subject content knowledge utilized by students in information seeking and evaluation tasks during health education lessons?

2. What kind of influence teacher’s opinions about trustworthy information sources have in students’ choices of useful sources?

Method

The data for this study was collected as a part of a larger CogAHealth project in three Finnish schools in the Spring semester 2017 by observing four classes in Grades 6-9 during health education lessons. Lessons were video and audio recorded, also written observation notes were made. During data gathering, our main interest was focused on students’ (N=77) learning methods and multiliteracy skills in teamwork situations. Although teachers (N=5) were not the focus of the observation, my interests to study their actions arose during the analysis phase based on the video and audio material. In addition, three teachers were interviewed, each interview lasted about one hour. The interviews are used to support the analysis.

This study concentrates on two classes, in which the interaction between the teachers and the students seemed to be relaxed and benevolent. In these two classes were also differences, mainly in the attitudes towards technology and the use of computers hence the final outputs varied. In both classes, teamwork themes and the duration of the data collection were chosen by the teachers. The teamwork themes were based on the health education curriculum, namely, diets in one class and chronic and infectious diseases in the other class. In accordance with the researchers’ wishes, teachers did not restrict student’s choices of the information sources. The unlimited use of sources aimed at bringing forth the information seeking abilities and the cognitive authorities of the present-day young people.

The analysis method is nexus analysis, which is an ethnographic research orientation. It is utilized as an encompassing methodological strategy, complemented by other analysis methods if needed. In nexus analysis, the central point of interest is a social action, where people, places, discourses, and objects are intertwined. (Scollon & Scollon 2004.) In the classroom situations, nexus analysis is an appropriate analysis method, because it explains not only discourses but it takes also into consideration participant’s historical bodies and their motives to act in the way they do (Burke 1969). The social actions, which interest in this study, are the teamwork situations in the health education lessons. The interaction between the teacher and the students in information seeking and evaluating situations is the nexus of practice in this study.

Conclusions

Teachers seem to have a diverse authority position in the classroom. In this study, the students leaned on their teachers with a very low threshold and trusted in the teacher’s subject content knowledge. In several occasions, health education contents were challenging to the students and the used information sources contained contradictory information, which was confounding. It happened at times that even the teachers had difficulties in interpreting health communication from various sources. Both teachers were well available to the students and discussions between teachers and students were fruitful.

The interaction in the classrooms was open and the teachers were easy to approach. According to the analysis, the historical body of the teacher, that is, teacher’s past and present life experiences, affects the class atmosphere and how approachable they are. Teacher’s good intentions and benevolence towards students generated trustworthiness, which for its part precedes trust. Trust builds up over time and it is based on the good experiences of each other in the interaction. This means that not only students regard their teacher trustworthy, but the teacher needs to trust students as well (Sztompka 1999, 61-62). Through
the trust process, a teacher can gain the status of a trustee, who guides students to choose and use credible information sources.

The school environment regulates the nexus of practice, as, for instance, lessons have predetermined length and spatial space. Further, the curriculum defines what is the subject content and how it ought to be taught. Information seeking and evaluating in schools may differ from that in the leisure time, because implicit norms in schools dictate which information sources are advisable to use in schoolwork. Also, the tools used in information seeking may vary, as in the school, students are encouraged to use books and other teacher-approved sources instead of googling by their phones.

References