

## **How teenagers justified their swine flu vaccination decision**

### **Background and Framework**

During 2009 and 2010 a flu pandemic, the “swine flu”, took a lot of media space in many countries. The break out of a pandemic is an opportunity for research in biology education to investigate in what ways people interpret scientific and other information and make decisions about their health. This situation is an example of what Beck (1999) calls the risk society, where individuals have to make decisions about how to handle a health problem.

### **Purpose and Research questions**

The purpose with this study was to develop knowledge about connections between how teenagers talk about themselves and their made decision about the swine flu and the vaccination against it. The purpose was also to investigate if the teenagers expressed school and science education as one possible repertoire of a swine flu discourse among others.

- How are the decisions about the vaccination justified among teenagers?
- In what ways influenced school and science education on the teenagers' vaccination decision?

### **Rationale**

Kolstø (2006) means that empirical research within the rational reasoning field has been experimental and based on tasks with structured problems. There have been critics against this way of investigating reasoning because it differs from decision-making in daily life and decision-making outside school (Kolstø, 2006). By knowing more about individuals' decision-making and how they justify their choices, it might be easier for science education to engage the students and to promote decision-making.

### **Methods**

Seven teenagers who volunteered to participate in the project were provided with a video camera and an mp3-player. The teenagers were requested to document and comment their decision about the swine flu and belonging offered vaccination. The teenagers made their diaries during the weeks the vaccination programme was going on. After the material was transcribed, the informants were also interviewed. During the interview, some of the material was discussed with the teenager, watching a small part of the video diary. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Analysis**

Discourse can be explained as a certain way to talk about and understand the world. This approach emphasizes that the way we understand the world is historically and culturally dependent and thereby contingent (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). “People are using their language to construct versions of the social world. This construction implies active selection where some resources are included and some omitted” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 33-34). By analysing texts from the teenagers in the study an opportunity to understand how they construct their “swine flu discourse” is possible.

In the beginning of the analysis the material was carefully read several times, looking for words that expressed justifications and other expressions about the flu and the vaccination. These words and expressions were then brought together in themes, guided by the definition by Potter and Wetherell about interpretative repertoires; “used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena” (1987, p. 149).

## Results

The categorised interpretative repertoires are of two different main types. In the first main type important nouns were identified, nouns that were repeated during the video diaries or interviews. This main type is called *experienced emphases*. The repertoires in this main type are risk, solidarity and knowledge. The second type of main type of interpretative repertoires is labeled *important actors*. The repertoires were family and friends, media, school, and society. In the second main type of interpretative repertoires, the family and friends and the media repertoires were those two repertoires that seemed most available for teenagers. The school repertoire was only used by one of the teenagers in the video diaries. Nobody of the teenagers used a repertoire clearly connected to science when they in their diaries justified their decisions about the new flu and the vaccination.

## Conclusions

The results demonstrate that the vaccination decision to high degree is seen as a risk assessment by the teenagers. The concern about risks as discussed by Beck (1999) is very obvious in the study, made from an individual level. All individuals in the study use the risk repertoire and try to deal with the issue from their perspective. It is possible to see how the risk repertoire is used by the teenagers, but there the outcome of their reasoning ends in different decisions. Often the risk is connected with the vaccination, not the disease. The family and friends repertoire seems to contrast some of the most spectacular media reports. Several of the informants reason about the media reports and their conclusions of the reports indicate that they have a critical view of media reports but find them hard to evaluate as reported by Korpan et al. (1997).

## Implications

The importance of solidarity and family and friends when making the vaccination decision is obvious. We argue for a health education that starts in questions that impact the student's or his or her's relatives' life. This conclusion is supporting Ratcliffe and Grace (2003) who mean that values and beliefs on a personal level is of large importance in decision-making. The result indicates of the need of using media reports in dealing with scientific literacy but also in risk assessment and health discussions in school. Finally, this study has met the critique from Kolstø (2006) about the lack of studies in decision-making outside school, something we think is of importance to go further with in science education research.

## Bibliography

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