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The climate of inclusive classrooms: the pupil perspective

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This paper offers insights into learning experiences in inclusive classrooms, gained by giving voices to pupils about their perceptions of themselves and their opinions on classroom climate. A positive response pattern is identified concerning academic and social dimensions of schools, while the overall picture concerning the dimension of participation is more blurred. The paper argues for further explorations of the concept of educational participation in inclusive settings, not only with a focus upon the psychological classroom climate aspects, but also upon the pedagogical and didactic processes that constitute the learning conditions for pupils with disabilities included in mainstream classrooms.

Keywords: educational inclusion; participation; student voices; classroom climate

Setting the stage

In Scandinavian countries, the idea of including all learners in mainstream schools has been accepted for decades. The question, however, is whether this is an ideal rather than actual practice, as the practice seems often to fall short of the mark. Scandinavian research literature indicates several problematic experiences for pupils placed in inclusive settings (Emanuelsson 1998; Dalen 1999; Tetler 2000; Nes 2004; Marinosson, Ohna, and Tetler 2007; Deloitte 2010; Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2010). Thus, the gap between ideology and reality – and the reasons for this gap – seems to be crucial to the outcome of inclusion efforts.

It raises questions about whether and how the 'quality' of inclusive settings should be judged. For instance, have the efforts in inclusive settings been reduced to a matter of physical placement, depending on the pupil's adaptability to the more or less standardised norms of the mainstream school? Or are the efforts characterised by flexibility and comprehensiveness, allowing pupils with disabilities to be involved as active participants on their own terms? These kinds of questions imply an organisational perspective, since the way in which the learning environment is organised for pupils with disabilities affects the outcomes (academically, socially and personally) for that group of pupils (as for other groups) (Dyson, Howes, and Roberts 2002; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Alborz et al. 2009; Sydney 2010).

Farrell argues for a school-related concept of inclusion that includes four aspects: presence, acceptance, participation and achievement (2004). He stresses: 'It is not, for example, sufficient for children to simply be *present* in a school' (8). If schools are to be characterised as inclusive, they should also welcome all pupils and accept them as valuable and active participants of their learning community. Furthermore, all pupils should be allowed to participate and contribute to all school activities, as well as to learn and develop positive views about themselves. Thus, the research challenge is how to gain substantial knowledge

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about what constitutes a high-quality inclusive setting by examining the four aspects from teachers', parents' and pupils' points of view. The results reported in this article show how children with disabilities experience being pupils in inclusive settings and how they characterise the learning conditions which they face?

The pupil perspective on learning

The pupil perspective is a growing field of research interest. The agenda emerges from the influence of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Worldwide Education for All (EFA) project. The convention, as well as the EFA project, highlights children's right and competence to be involved in decisions about themselves 'in accordance with the[ir] age and maturity' (UNCRC, Article 12). As a consequence, as pupils, children are key stakeholders to be consulted on issues concerning all decisions at all levels related to schooling (Ainscow 2007; Lewis and Porter 2007; Ruddock 2007; Mitchell 2008). The convention seems to assume that there are no boundaries for involving children as users of welfare provision or co-researchers in educational studies. However, listening to pupils' voices in educational research presents many challenges (Lewis and Porter 2007). A major issue, for example, is how to give voice to pupils with learning disabilities, some of them with severe intellectual disabilities. Even though researchers are careful to communicate in a supportive manner or involve facilitators (e.g., their assistants), there is a risk that some of these children do not really understand the subject matter or that they try to please the supporting staff.

Nevertheless, following the guiding principles from UNCRC and EFA, pupils' voices are rich sources for achieving an understanding of their self-perception as pupils and experiences about their learning environment and classroom climate. Studies document that pupils emphasise the importance of being able to learn, to participate in the social life of school, and to give and take more responsibility at all institutional levels (Ruddock 2007). In Danish contexts as well, young people with disabilities have provided many new insights about their experiences, including how they often feel deprived of influence in their own lives and living conditions. They also report loss of competence and opportunity for taking initiatives, making up one's mind and acting self-dependently (Høgsbro et al. 1999; Ringsmose and Buch-Hansen 2004; Mehlbye 2009). Following the UNCRC, every pupil has the right to speak up, so the challenge is how to conduct research about the youngest pupils' perceptions about their school experiences in order to create a classroom climate in which opportunities like being courageous, believing in oneself and learning to look upon oneself as important for the community can and do occur.

Therefore, the research design for the present study is based on theoretical models that focus on the relations between person and context. A learning context is characterised by situational requirements and demands, and development of competence is a result of the interaction between the context and personal attributes (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Wentzel 2006). These attributes are cognitive, self-monitoring, and self-regulating skills as well as personal goals and values. Pupil experiences are primarily influenced by proximal processes, such as relations, communication, and interactions (Bronfenbrenner 1999), and positive experiences are related to the quality of proximal processes. The lesson to be learned from Bronfenbrenner is that tools for a study about pupils' outcomes in inclusive settings should include indicators related to personal competencies as well as to broader learning. Indicators have to include learning situations, social relationships between the teacher and pupils as well as among pupils, communication and interaction from the interpersonal as well as the intrapersonal perspective.

In order to gain more detailed knowledge about the intrapersonal perspective, it has been necessary to include further theoretical perspectives in addition to Bronfenbrenner's model. For example, Bandura's (1994) concept of self-efficacy focuses on an understanding of motivation for learning as well as a synthesis of self-regulated processes taking place in social interactions. Later, Bandura (1997) developed the concept of collective efficacy, which means that groups can develop shared efficacy beliefs. Efficacy is thus an important dynamic source of motivation for self-monitoring, and is often described as self-regulated learning (SRL) (McCaslin et al. 2006). The concept of self-efficacy has been explored by Westling Allodi (2007) in a study assessing the quality of learning environments in Swedish schools, who found that self-affirmation has a central position in evaluating the quality of learning environments, since it has an interpersonal as well as an intrapersonal dimension.

The research design builds on results from a body of empirical studies on the quality of learning environments. According to a recent research meta-review, 'there is clear evidence that the quality of the classroom climate is a significant determinant of learners' achievement. They learn better when they have positive perceptions of the classroom environment' (Mitchell 2008, 103). Three main factors in creating a climate that facilitates learning have been identified (Mitchell 2008, 103–4):

(1) Relationships (the extent to which people in the classroom support and help each other).
(2) Personal development (the extent to which personal growth and self-enhancement is facilitated).
(3) System maintenance (the extent to which the classroom is orderly, and educators are clear in their expectations, maintain control and are responsive to change).

This view is supported by a review from the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research (Nordenbo 2008). However, Nordenbo mentions the issue of the German traditions with focus on 'Bildung' when conducting meta-reviews on classroom management (2006). According to the German tradition, education is rooted in philosophy, and this tradition has been very influential in Scandinavian countries, including Denmark. Nordenbo argues that the ethics and morality included in the philosophical position of 'Bildung' and didactics is indeed a necessary perspective. The problem is, however, that this dimension is excluded from review concepts like The Clearinghouse and the EPPI concepts (Nordenbo 2008; Dyson, Howes, and Roberts 2002). Therefore, the present study also draws on Meyer's alternative meta-review, which takes into account German contexts, in which he finds ten characteristics of good teaching (Meyer 2004).

In this study there is a thread from the principles of the Convention, through Farrell's claim for a school-related concept of inclusion, Bronfenbrenner's and Bandura's theoretical perspectives, and three different meta-reviews (Meyer 2004; Mitchell 2008; Nordenbo 2008). These findings are synthesised into a set of indicators for assessment of quality in inclusive education in Denmark:

- Personal indicators (learning in schools, social relationships, participation).
- Contextual indicators: (a) physical context variables (environment); (b) social context variables (relations, meaningful communication, collaboration, influence, participation, responsibility); (c) Bildung/didactic variables (differentiation, clear structure).

Mitchell states that he has 'not been able to find any research that focuses on learners with special educational needs' (Mitchell 2008, 108). However, Lewis and Porter's studies

(2007) report on data giving voice to pupils with disabilities which focuses on the rights perspective and reveals findings about some of the dimensions of the classroom climate. The present Danish study has focused on methods of collecting data about characteristics of the learning environment for pupils with disabilities and their non-disabled classmates in mainstream classrooms in the US and Denmark, in order to be able to compare their views (Tetler et al. 2010).

Methods

The study reported in this paper sought to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of educational inclusion and participation in mainstream classrooms and the opinions held by the pupils involved. It is part of a larger research project, dealing with the learning experiences of 26 pupils with disabilities (diagnosed with ADHD, autism, blindness, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and learning difficulties). Fourteen pupils were included in mainstream classrooms, while the remaining twelve pupils were placed in more segregated settings such as special classes and special schools. All the pupils were in primary education (age 6–10 years). The research was funded by the Danish Ministry of Education and aimed to explore the policy question of whether or not the resources being directed to special education services were 'working' (Egelund and Tetler 2009).

Studying educational patterns required a systemic approach to capture classroom complexity in a variety of ways (Salomon 1991). To this end, a wide range of methods was used, including interviews with pupils with disabilities, semi-structured interviews with their teachers and parents, classroom-based interviews about the learning climate with the pupils with disabilities as well as with their classmates (304 in all), collection of individual educational plans, collection of teachers' diaries with 'success stories', and observations of teaching and learning activities in each classroom. In all, the research was conducted as a multi-site, multi-researcher qualitative project (with a focus on the learning conditions for 26 pupils with disabilities, placed in 24 classrooms across 23 schools distributed among 18 Danish municipalities) (Tetler et al. 2009; Ferguson and Tetler 2009).

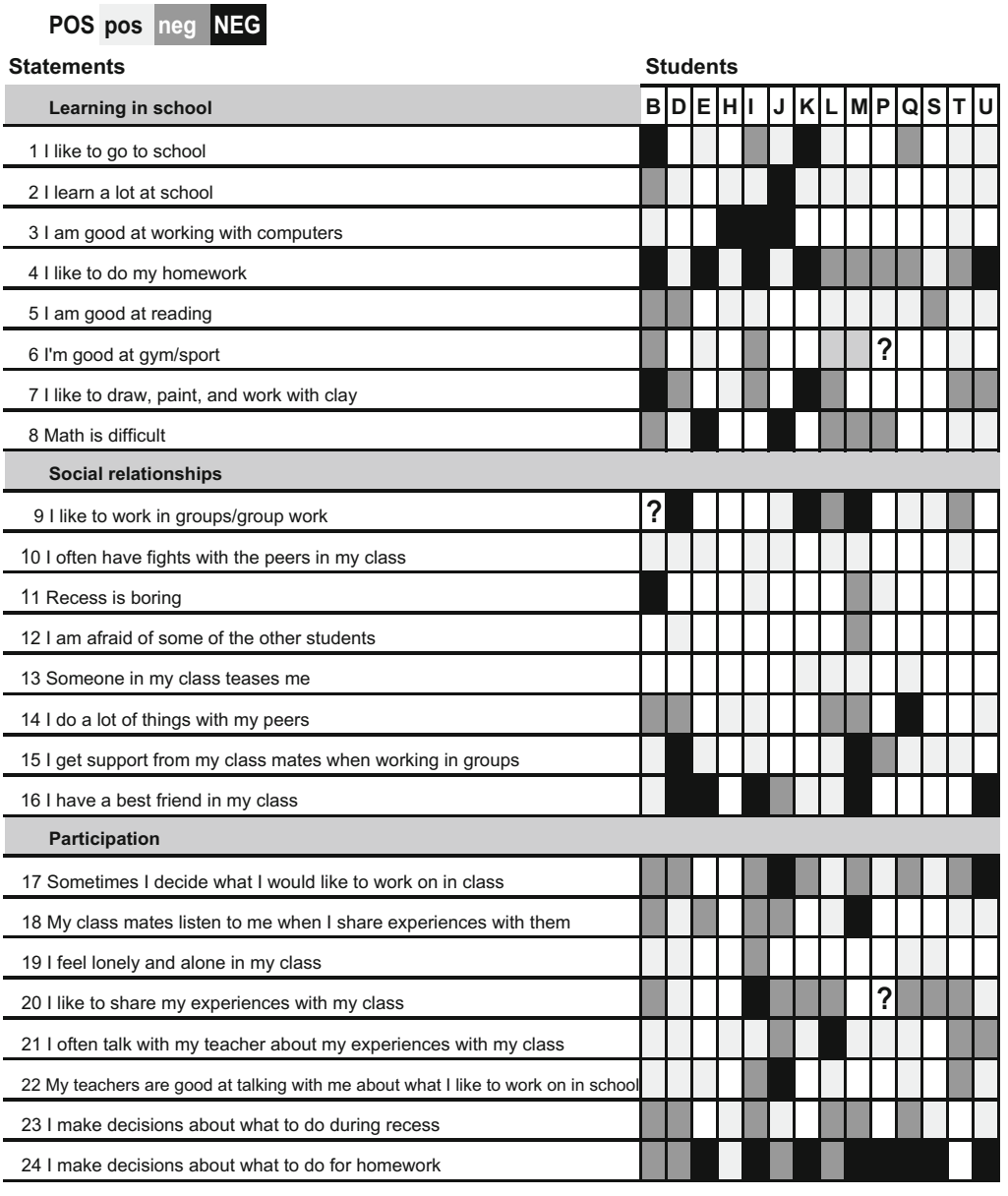
This article deals with the insights gained through interviews with the 14 pupils with disabilities who were included in mainstream classrooms. The interviews about the intrapersonal perspective were conducted as individual interviews with the pupils with disabilities, while the second ones, about the learning environment, were conducted as group interviews with both the pupils with disabilities and their classmates. These group interviews were structured as conversations about statements taken one at a time. The research team ran the interview sessions and the local teachers assisted and supported the process through dialogue with the pupils. This procedure allowed us to gather comparable data from a very diverse group of pupils. The answers were collected on answering sheets designed in a questionnaire format to create a shortcut access to pupils' opinions. The sheets are similar to the format and categories in the questionnaire section of the Index for Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, and Vaughn 2002), and it was only necessary to exclude very few answers due to unclear responses on the answering sheets.

Findings

Findings regarding the intrapersonal perspective: pupils' perceptions of themselves

The first interview was about 'Pupils' perceptions of themselves on three dimensions of school experiences: academic, social, and how much they saw themselves as active participants' (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' perceptions of themselves.



Fourteen pupils with disabilities participated in this interview and they are mostly positive about the academic dimension of the school. They like being in school (statement 1), and they learn a lot (statement 2). The answers are positive about learning in school in general, and when asked about specific subjects, most of them have positive experiences in reading, ICT, sports/gym, and arts, while math (statement 8) and especially homework is problematic, as only four pupils claimed they liked to do their homework (statement 4). Pupils reported positive learning experiences about school subjects. Self-efficacy is included in academic self-perception, and the findings indicate a good sense of efficacy concerning academic

requirements and therefore motivation for schoolwork. Thus, the teachers seem to succeed in creating a positive academic self-perception among the pupils with disabilities.

Pupils are positive as well about the social dimension of school-life, except for two pupils (M and D). All pupils experience school as a safe place to be, free from unkindness and bullying (statements 10, 11, 12 and 13). On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that they have a 'best friend' in their learning community (statement 16). Their experiences within some of the proximal processes about interactions and relations might be the source for this positive finding. Put in other words, classrooms in primary education seem to create niches for positive interactions among pupils. This positive pattern regarding social relationships is remarkable, as earlier Danish studies show that pupils with disabilities included in mainstream classrooms often feel lonely and isolated (e.g., Kristoffersen 1990). Her study is based on parents' perspectives and reports, and thus might raise questions about the trustworthiness of adults' interpretations of children's experiences. At least it stresses the need for in-depth studies of children's own constructions of their everyday school life.

Another striking pattern is the more mixed picture of responses to statements about participation and involvement in decisions about schoolwork (statement 17–24). To be clear, it should be mentioned that teacher assistants are assigned to 11 (of the 14) pupils' learning environments, while three pupils are taught in classrooms with teachers sharing the responsibility. Seen from that perspective, the finding is not surprising, as it quite well reflects the problematic relationship between pupils with disabilities and their assistants that has emerged from other studies (e.g., Andersen, Ellehammer, and Holstein 1979; Ferguson et al. 1992). More specifically, the most negative responses refer to feeling involved in decisions about schoolwork. For instance, 'I make decisions about what to do for homework' (statement 24), to which 12 out of 14 pupils did not agree. Almost the same response pattern showed up at statement 17: 'Sometimes I decide what I would like to work on in class', as two-thirds of the pupils' answers were negative. On the other hand, they participate in relation to their peers; for instance, only one pupil feels socially isolated within her class (statement 19), and almost two-thirds of the pupils claim that their peers are listening to them when they want to share their experiences (statement 18).

On the one hand, 'Participation' supports positive self-perceptions about social relations; on the other hand, pupils' voices are quite negative about involvement in decision-making about their social life and subject matter. Sharing their own experiences with classmates calls for interpretation. Despite positive perceptions about the social relations within the class, the majority of the pupils do not like to share experiences with their peers. Maybe pupils with disabilities find their experiences too different from those of their peers. The negative response pattern may serve as a negative correction to the positive self-perception about social relationships, or at least as an issue of concern when attempting to maintain niches for the development of positive self-perception in the academic and social dimensions of school-life (see Bronfenbrenner 1999; Almquist, Eriksson, and Granlund 2004).

According to the pupils' perceptions, the teachers seem to succeed in facilitating the acquisition of learning motivation and academic achievement (Hedegaard and Chaiklin 2005), as well as experiences of membership in the learning community (Tønnesvang 2002). However, when pupils' perceptions are linked to perceptions about related themes, pupils express views that are not as supportive of the development of motivation and membership in the community.

Findings regarding the interpersonal perspective: pupils' opinions about their classroom environment

The second interview was about 'Pupils' opinions about their classroom environment' (Table 2). One thing is pupils' self esteem; but quite another is their evaluation of their

Table 2. Students' opinions on their classroom environment.

learning environment when it comes to physical surroundings, teaching structures and issues of participation, influence and responsibility. Thus, this tool is meant mainly to highlight relationships and system maintenance (see Mitchell 2008).

Taking a closer look at the pupils' response pattern concerning their opinions about their learning environment, some results stand out clearly. Four didactic themes are

addressed in this interview and the pupils' statements are predominantly positive about the themes of 'clear structure' (statement 5–8) and 'meaningful communication' (statements 9–12). For instance, with the exception of one pupil, they all state that their teachers are good at explaining what they need to do (statement 8) and how to progress (statement 11). A more negative pattern emerges from the pupil responses concerning their physical environment. Sixty-two per cent of the responses were negative, especially with reference to problems with lack of peace to work (statement 5), as pupils with disabilities seem to suffer from that lack. They need good space and order, as well as a wide range of differentiated activities available at the same time. With regard to differentiation being part of the teaching pattern, 78 per cent of all the answers are positive (statements 13–16). It is especially striking that all pupils state that it is okay in their learning communities not to be equally good at everything (statement 16). Pupils also experience that their teachers use a wide range of materials for them to work with (statement 13), and that they draw a clear picture of good relations with their teachers.

The four themes of 'collaboration', 'influence', 'participation' and 'responsibility' are related to the factors of 'relationships' and 'personal development' mentioned in Mitchell's model. Influence (statements 21–24) is about being able to decide for oneself, getting your ideas appreciated and experiencing significant others' attention to how you are doing in school. Participation (statements 25–28) refers to being part of and being listened to by the learning community. And again (as in the former interview), influence seems to be quite difficult for the teachers to leave room for (statements 21–24), with almost 50% negative responses. Pupils' experiences of participation are more positive, with about two-thirds positive.

Concerning 'collaboration' (statements 17–20) and 'responsibility' (statements 29–32) pupils express more positive experiences. Roughly speaking, one-third of the pupils have quite negative experiences and two-thirds of the pupils are positive about their classroom climate on these dimensions.

According to Bandura and Bronfenbrenner, it is important to experience control over the demands and requirements of school situations. The eight themes on which the interview study is based are related to these demands and the majority of positive experiences indicate that pupils experience a learning environment adapted to their needs. The findings are also supportive of SRL (self-regulated learning) processes within zones of proximal development as stated in the theories of Vygotsky.

Combined findings of the two interviews

The two interviews seek information about similar themes (from different perspectives), but the later one takes a broader view of classroom climate than does the interview about pupils' perceptions of themselves. Comparing data on similar statements, the response patterns of the two tools are mainly consistent and mutual supportive. By combining findings from the two interviews it is possible to create a synthesis that expresses 'pupils' voices' about their classroom climate as described by Mitchell's three factors' model for the learning environment.

As mentioned earlier, an interview theme may sometimes relate to more than one factor in Mitchell's model and this is mirrored in the synthesis of the findings. The analysis creates a picture of the learning environment seen from pupils' perspective as follows:

- Concerning 'relationships': pupils' self-perceptions about support and helpfulness are positive concerning help from peers as well as from their teachers. However, they feel uneasy sharing their own experiences.

- Concerning 'personal development': pupils experience personal growth in academic achievement and self-enhancement. However, they are negative about being able to make decisions about important things in school.
- Concerning 'system maintenance': the response patterns are positive for the themes 'clear structure', 'differentiation' and 'meaningful communication'; however, it is blurred for the theme 'physical environment'.

Conclusion

This article has explored the research questions: what outcomes do children with disabilities experience being in inclusive settings, and how do they characterise their learning environments? A small segment of a large dataset has been selected to illustrate how pupils construct the classroom climate, including their experiences of membership. The results indicate that pupils with disabilities are able to participate in a classroom-based interview. The overall findings show that they evaluate their learning environment quite positively; however, there are important nuances to note. First and foremost, they seem to lack positive experiences of influence and appreciation. It is an evident challenge for schools to create learning situations and processes based on values such as 'pupil influence' and 'educational participation', if they are to be characterised as inclusive (see also Farrell 2004).

Considering the findings more theoretically (following Bronfenbrenner 1986; Bandura 1997; Almquist, Eriksson, and Granlund 2004), the pupils' quite positive attitudes towards their school experiences with regard to the academic and social dimensions of schooling are results or outcomes of reciprocal dynamic relationships between personal and environmental factors. The overall picture of environmental dimensions, such as physical environment, clear structure, meaningful communication, differentiation, collaboration, participation and responsibility, is positive. This is in line with the theoretical views behind the study, as Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes (relations, communication and interactions) are included in these environmental dimensions. Both Bronfenbrenner and Bandura argue that beliefs and efficacy are context specific, e.g., characterised by situational requirements and demands. The pupils' assessment of their school experiences up to Grade 4/5 is that the varied classroom contexts (set by the school subjects, physical surroundings, need of support from teachers and classmates, etc) have met their requirements and demands for support.

Discussion

It was mentioned earlier that mainstream school situations for pupils with disabilities relate to a wide range of issues dealing with disengagement, marginalisation and school failure. This seems not to be the case among the pupils in this study, as they express mostly positive experiences of their learning environments. However, this finding should be considered in conjunction with the pupils' ages, as they are early in their schooling. The question is whether (and for which aspects) pupils' opinions about their learning environment will change during schooling. Therefore, it is obvious (and desirable) that we need to repeat this interview for the same group of pupils at three-yearly intervals to follow their perspectives. Indeed, the research field of educational inclusion needs longitudinal studies that look more closely at the nature of processes of inclusion and exclusion over the years.

The starting point for the larger research project was to ask whether teaching and learning patterns in inclusive classrooms create opportunities for learning rather than caring, active participation rather than passiveness, and being a member of the learning community

rather than on your own (Tetler et al. 2009). The findings stemming from this interview study show a need for further exploration of the concept of participation in educational settings. It is important to stress that although pupils with disabilities report quite positive attitudes towards their school experiences with regard to academic and social dimensions of schooling, they report having little influence over important aspects of their everyday school life. When pupils have their influence on their own learning processes withdrawn, they are treated as objects, rather than subjects, and are likely to develop passiveness and helplessness. As a consequence, they will be likely to suppress their own wishes and motives and will present themselves as disengaged and passive. Later on in schooling or adult life, when asked for active participation and independent decision-making, they may not be able to, since they have lost this competence a long time ago. If this trend is to be reversed, we must take the educational challenge seriously, as suggested by Per Lorentzen (1998, 27): to work with children's motives and will to learn.

Facilitating pupils' development of autonomy and engagement in their own learning processes requires involving them in teaching planning and evaluation even if they have difficulties expressing their wishes or requests verbally. It requires a lot of creativity, perseverance and empathy to succeed in grasping the pupils' will to learn and in transforming it to sustainable practice. Not least, it requires time for reflections on how to balance inconsistent processes such as support and challenges to each individual pupil, protection and autonomy, security and risky situations (Tetler 2002). Thus, more research is needed to further explore the concept of educational participation and the meanings held by the pupils involved.

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