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Participation for Learning



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Foreword

Students' possibilities for participation in and influence over the learning process and work in school are of great importance for their academic achievement and well-being.

Both the Swedish Education Act and the Swedish curricula clearly state that democratic values and students' participation and influence should be as central to their education as knowledge of different school subjects.

Student participation and influence should be understood as an ongoing process that includes both formal decision-making and participation in education. It should not be equated with teachers handing over the teaching responsibilities to the students, or only focus on student contributions to formal decisions within the framework of, for example, class councils.

School development is an ongoing local process whose ultimate goal is that every child or student should be able to develop to the greatest possible extent. In this process it is important to take student perspectives into account.

This knowledge review presents research on what participation and influence amounts to and ways to work with student influence over decision-making processes and student active education.

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Student participation uplifts the entire school

Participation and influence involve students in their own education and motivation, increasing their accountability and learning. In schools, the links between participation, influence, learning and – ultimately – academic achievement are key. The discourse on how the decline in academic achievement in Swedish schools can be turned must encompass issues related to teaching, with student participation as an important part. However, this discussion cannot only focus on students contributing to formal decisions within the framework of, for example, class councils. Neither should student participation and influence in school be equated with teachers handing over teaching responsibility to students. In this review, we aim to illustrate how student participation can be understood as a continuous process that includes both students' influence over formal decision-making and student active education.

Deficiencies and possibilities

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's audits show that there is a great need to develop efforts in participation and influence:

Too many students state that they have little say and cannot affect the issues of real significance in schools.

Four out of ten students in year 9 of compulsory school do not consider themselves as having influence over the content and work method of education /... / More than every third compulsory school is inadequate in terms of providing influence to students over the content and structure of the education. /.../

According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, the reasons for this situation include that:

... there is uncertainty when it comes to allowing students themselves to influence the content and work methods in education. For example, a social studies teacher says that he is scared that 'things might spiral out of control' if students themselves were allowed to participate in developing assignments, while he agrees that it would be stimulating for the students. In order to adapt the curriculum to the unique ability of each student and provide the support and stimulation that are required, it is important to listen and give students the opportunity to participate and influence. (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's Five-year Report 2014, p. 15)

The work to create the conditions for learning and knowledge building in different school subjects as well as in democracy and fundamental values is regulated in the governing documents for schools. For example, the Education Act and curricula clearly state that democratic values – student participation and influence – should be as central as knowledge in different school subjects. The

Education Act's wording on participation and influence in schools is in turn based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which, among other things, asserts the right of children to freely express their opinions on all matters related to them. This knowledge review collates, illustrates and discusses current research with a focus on student participation and influence. In this review, participation should be understood as both *student influence over decision-making processes and active student education*.

There is a great deal of research on student participation and influence, with a number of studies revealing deficiencies and difficulties when it comes to participation in and influence over, for example, teaching structure and content. At the same time, there are also examples of students being given the opportunity to participate and exert a real influence.

School development based on student perspectives and their best interests is founded on participation and influence throughout – from the meeting between teachers and students during the lesson to the authorities' work on fulfilling the needs of all schools. Students should have the opportunity to inform adults at the school about their daily lives at school as well as about whether they feel safe and secure. Student experiences should be taken seriously and, if needed, result in necessary changes. During lessons, students should always be able to inform teachers about how things are functioning: both the positive and negative aspects. These ideas can be integrated into classes by working with feedback on learning or by allowing students to help plan different

components. Teachers will then always have a foundation for deciding whether changes need to be made in order to improve the students' education.

In turn, teachers may require support and resources to implement necessary changes based on student needs. Matters that teachers raise with the principal can create the necessary conditions for their teaching and collegial work. Moreover, the authorities have ultimate responsibility for schools. With this approach, that is, school development based on student needs, it becomes clear how student participation and influence form a foundation and influence the school's local governance.

Structure of the review

The knowledge review is divided into six chapters. Initially, the review addresses research on democracy work in schools and what participation means. The next chapter focuses on conditions for participation, such as teachers' and students' different roles, relational aspects and the significance of the physical and psycho-social environments.

In the following two chapters, student influence on decision-making processes through student and class councils, as well as active student education, are discussed. The review then describes research examples that illustrate the effects of student participation and influence in schools. In this chapter, the links between participation, relationships, learning and real changes, as well as motivation and responsibility, are presented.

The review concludes with a few thoughts about the future, including how student voices are becoming a

clearer part of school development. Furthermore, we discuss the need for staff training, organisational conditions for developing participation work and the importance of further pedagogical research that will highlight student participation and influence.

In conclusion, participation is highly important for students both as individuals and in different groupings, such as school classes. Experience has shown that an entire school can develop positively by strengthening student participation and influence, a fact that is important for the entire educational system as well as for society in general in the long run.

Democracy work of schools

Schools are an important platform for children and youth, affecting both childhood and adult life. Sweden's schools comprise the country's largest workplace, where some 1.5 million children and young people are educated. An institution that is to create the conditions for learning and knowledge building, in different school subjects as well as in democracy and fundamental values.

The fundamental democratic values held by Swedish schools are described in the governing documents for schools: the Education Act and curricula. These values include, for example, the sanctity of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality and solidarity between people. On the basis of the governing documents for schools, the work on fundamental democratic values is something that should permeate all school activities in a concrete manner. These democratic values should be included as a common thread when teaching is planned, implemented and evaluated.

By means of their education, students should develop knowledge of human rights and democracy. All school activities should be underpinned by democratic values – in classrooms, corridors, dining halls, changing rooms and outdoor playgrounds. Democratic forms of work should therefore be a natural part of education. Democratic work methods in classrooms enable students to

develop skills that will help them to become active citizens, both now and in the future. It is important to emphasise that fundamental democratic values should be assigned a central role in student learning, regardless of subject. Creating the conditions to ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to participate actively in issues affecting them and their learning is central to schooling. This is about student participation and influencing school activities.

Student participation and influence is a common thread throughout the chain of governance that provides guidelines and conditions for how work and learning should be organised. The core of these directives is the Education Act's wording on quality and influence (Chapter 4, §§ 9–10 of the Education Act), as well as introductory provisions with a special focus on the child's best interest (Chapter 1, § 10).

In the Education Act, you can see how the Convention on the Rights of the Child has served as guidance, such as in that children and students should be offered regular encouragement to take an active part in the work to further develop their education and be kept informed *about issues that concern them* and that the forms of their influence should be adapted *to their age and maturity*. Students should always have the opportunity to take the initiative in issues that concern them and their joint efforts to influence should also generally be supported and facilitated.

The Education Act also stresses that a special focus on the best interests of the child should always be the starting point for school activities, with child referring

to anyone below the age of 18. As far as possible, children's opinions should be heard and they should have the opportunity to freely express their views on all issues related to them. These opinions should be weighted in relation to the child's age and maturity. Even here we can see how principles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child have provided a starting point for the legislator.

In the governing chain, the Education Act's wording provides the basis for part one of the curricula, which concerns fundamental values and school mandates. The Education Act's wording also impacts part two of the curricula (overall objectives and guidelines), as well as in part three (course and subject syllabi). The *General advice for planning and implementing teaching* issued by the Swedish National Agency for Education includes participation and influence aspects in that teachers should plan their teaching based on the children's and students' own interests, experiences and notions of what education should address.

The curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr11) emphasises the importance of student participation and influence as follows:

The democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should cover all students. Students should be given influence over their education. They should be continuously encouraged to take an active part in the work of further developing education and kept informed of issues that concern them. The information and the means by which

students exercise influence should be related to their age and maturity. Students should always have the opportunity of taking the initiative on issues that should be treated within the framework of their influence over their education. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, p. 12)

The quote above illustrates that high expectations are imposed on Swedish schools in terms of student participation and that it should cover all students. Similar wordings also exist in the syllabus for upper secondary school. The challenge is realising the intentions of the governing chain through concrete work on participation in schools.

What does participation mean?

There are different perspectives on what participation and influence in schools means. On the one hand it entails students acquiring actual knowledge of how a democratic society functions and the rights and obligations of a citizen. On the other it entails opportunities to make their voices heard and be given the chance to actively influence their education. In the article *Towards a theory of children's participation*, Nigel Thomas claims that participation can be understood as students' *influence over decision-making processes* and students being *active in their education*. However, it is important to point out that there are no sharp dividing lines between the different perspectives because in practice they overlap. This knowledge review focuses on student participation based on Nigel Thomas' definition. It starts, however, by

briefly illustrating the level of student knowledge about democracy as a foundation for forthcoming parts of the review.

*Future involvement in society:
knowledge, attitudes and values*

Student knowledge of democracy and political decision-making is an important foundation for being able to work with participation in schools in an authentic manner, and Swedish students generally have good knowledge of these matters. The *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study*, ICCS 2009, conducts an international comparison of student knowledge of, attitudes towards and values concerning democracy and citizenship, as well as their current and future involvement in society. Fourteen-year-old students in 38 different countries were included in the survey. A report from the Swedish National Agency for Education, *Morgondagens medborgare* (Future Citizens), presents the Swedish results of the ICCS, with Swedish students' knowledge, values and participation in the area showing significantly above-average awareness in an international comparison. The best academic achievements are seen in four countries, including Denmark and Finland. Sweden is part of a group of seven countries following the lead group.

The question that can be asked in light of the results of the ICCS is which factors can be deemed to have an impact on the results? In this context, studies have shown, for instance, that the classroom atmosphere plays a vital role in students' knowledge of democracy. Students who feel that the classroom atmosphere is open

– that the teacher encourages discussion, allows them to express their own views and opinions and respects them
– have good knowledge of democracy. This is seen in an analysis of the study *Ung i demokrati* (Young people in democracy, IEA Civic Education Study). This study was conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education and is presented in the report *Skolans roll för elevers kunskaper om demokrati – en fördjupad analys av Ung i demokrati-studie* (The role of schools in students' knowledge of democracy – an in-depth analysis of the Young people in democracy study).

The report Morgondagens medborgare found that students who follow the news on TV and in newspapers, as well as discuss the news with friends, parents or other adults, have more knowledge of democracy than students who do this more rarely. However, it was found that an open atmosphere in the classroom has three times as great an impact on their knowledge of democracy compared to keeping up with the news. An open and permissive atmosphere between teachers and students is thus the most important factor for knowledge of democracy. Moreover, it is not only knowledge which improves, as discussions also develop students' democratic approach to other people.

Student influence over decision-making processes and active student education

Based on Nigel Thomas' definition of participation, as described earlier, this knowledge review is based on student participation in schools being about the opportunity to exercise influence over decision-making processes

in school and students being active in their education. Active student education is based on students' experiences, interests and needs, providing them with an opportunity to have an active role in their education.

Maria Rönnlund has studied participation in the form of decision-making in schools, as presented in the thesis *Demokrati och deltagande: Elevinflytande i grundskolans årskurs 7–9 ur ett könsperspektiv* (Democracy and participation: Student influence in lower secondary schools from a gender perspective). She makes a distinction between formal and informal influence. The former entails influence in formal contexts, such as, for example, class and student councils, while informal influence is about informal decision-making processes in education. Helene Elvstrand, in her thesis *Delaktighet i skolans vardagsarbete* (Participation in the daily work of schools), defines participation in the form of decision-making as political participation. Besides this type of participation, Elvstrand also studied social participation, which entails students feeling that they can participate and be included in a social community, which can be linked to the rights of all students to participate in activities. Elvstrand also emphasises that participation is about whether the person in question feels that they can participate – hence the perception of participation.

The feeling of participation is also discussed by Margareta Aspán in her thesis *Delade meningar: Om värdepedagogiska invitationer för barns inflytande och igenkännande* (Shared and divided minds: on affordances in education for participant and sympathetic children). Aspán contends that students may feel that they can

participate without actually actively influencing school activities. It may be the case that students are part of a community that permits them to make their voices heard, but at the same time they understand that it is not always possible to influence and change decisions, as there are limitations to their influence. Despite this, students still have a feeling of participation in schools. The reverse may also happen – that students are given the opportunity to make their voices heard, but that school personnel do not convey their thoughts and opinions, which means that students are not given influence in the form of, for example, co-determination. The research of Elvstrand and Aspán is also described in the book *Värdepedagogik: Etik och demokrati i förskola och skola* (Values pedagogy: Ethics and democracy in preschools and schools). One example of the two perspectives participation in decision-making processes and student-active education overlapping is when international research emphasises that participation is about students having the opportunity to practice their leadership in school scenarios. The American researcher Dana Mitra writes about this in her article *Adults advising youth: Leading while getting out of the way*. This may entail students and teachers collaborating on common interests at school and students being given the opportunity to lead some school activities (such as certain aspects of teaching or student and class councils) and in this manner affect their schooling. Consequently, some activities may concern both perspectives of participation, that is, as influence on decision-making processes and active participation in one's education.

As the results of the ICCS report show, Swedish students have relatively good knowledge of democracy, which is encouraging. However, the Swedish National Agency for Education's report *Attityder till skolan 2012* (Attitudes towards school 2012) shows that students perceive that their opportunities to influence have declined in recent years. Students' willingness to participate and influence their academic situation is greater than the perceived opportunities. Willingness among older students to influence has declined compared to previous attitude surveys. This can be perceived as problematic as the governing chain very clearly emphasises that student responsibility and influence should increase with age and maturity. Since the willingness of older students to influence has declined in comparison with the 2003 and 2006 surveys, their perceived influence has also declined.

One possible explanation as to why students perceive a decline in their opportunities for participation could be a feeling that their real influence is limited. If they feel that they are not taken seriously or do not have real influence when they make their voices heard, their willingness to try to influence most likely decreases too. As a consequence, it is important to continue the work on student participation and influence in schools by developing the desire of younger students to participate more while at the same time encouraging older students to make their voices heard and to allow them to actively influence their education.

In order to increase child and youth participation in decision-making and activities, different models have been developed for structuring this work in practice.

One model that has had great impact on understanding and working with participation is the *ladder of participation*. The first ladder of participation from 1969 contains eight steps that show different degrees of adult participation in society. It was developed by Sherry Arnstein and is described in the article *A ladder of citizen participation*. The model has been reformulated a couple of times, such as to enable better opportunities for child participation.

Interest in child and youth participation in preschools, schools and society in general has constantly increased, with Robert Hart's model of the ladder of participation having been the most influential. In 1992, he further developed the ladder of participation to apply to child and youth participation in society. This further development is presented in the article *Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Robert Hart's ladder of participation also contains eight steps, where the bottom three steps entail a lack of participation while the top five relate to different degrees of participation.

Vägar till delaktighet: Öppningar, möjligheter och skyldigheter (Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations), a report that was originally written by Harry Shier and translated into Swedish through the project *Egen växtkraft* (Own growing power), presents another version of the ladder of participation. This version focuses on the five steps that cover different degrees of participation:

1. children are listened to
2. children are supported in expressing their views
3. children's views are taken into account

4. children are involved in decision-making processes
5. children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

The model is based on article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and uses the five levels of participation as a foundation. This model is a concrete example of how child and youth participation can be strengthened in society at large, but can naturally also be used within school activities to increase students' participation, providing them with influence over school decisions and an active role in their education.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Elvstrand, H. (2009). *Delaktighet i skolans vardagsarbete* (Participation in the daily work of schools). Doctoral thesis, Linköping University.
- Johansson, E. & Thornberg, R. (ed.) (2014). *Värdepedagogik. Etik och demokrati i förskola och skola* (Values pedagogy. Ethics and democracy in preschools and schools). Stockholm: Liber.

Conditions for participation

Research shows that there are a number of conditions that are decisive for whether participation and influence has any real impact on students' learning and their opportunities to develop a democratic approach. As mentioned earlier, there are different ways of viewing student participation and influence on education. In the literature review that Jan Grannäs conducted in his thesis *Framtidens demokratiska medborgare: Om ungdomar, medborgarskap och demokratifostran i svensk skola* (Future democratic citizens: young people on citizenship and democratic fostering in Swedish schools), he identifies two different aspects that determine the framework for student participation. One aspect concerns *legal and organisational issues*, which refers to the rules and structures regulating students' opportunities for participation and influence, including the professional power of school management and teachers. The second aspect relates to *pedagogical issues*, where influence is seen as a method for people to create meaning. As a professional, such as a principal or teacher, the challenge lies in determining when students should be given opportunities to negotiate on teaching methods and the boundaries for influence and participation. Grannäs asserts that opportunities for and limitations on participation and influence are often determined by the professional judgement of teachers, often through spur-of-the-moment decisions.

Some conditions for student participation, in terms of both influence over decision-making processes and student-active education, are illustrated and problematised in this chapter, namely the role of teachers and students, relational perspectives, the classroom environment and the importance of discussions and community.

Importance of teacher and student roles in participation

The curricula's focus on students having the opportunity to participate and exercise influence on their education challenges the traditional roles of teachers and students to a certain extent. Encouraging students to participate and have an influence over school activities may entail the need to re-examine teacher and student roles, which impacts social relationships and thereby the classroom hierarchy. The way in which students and teachers act and express themselves can be seen as an ongoing process. Teachers and students often act based on predetermined patterns of how they are expected to be. This can sometimes constitute an obstacle to student participation. Teachers are often considered solely responsible for the learning environment. Students, on the other hand, are often considered to lack the competence to have a real influence due to insufficient experience, maturity and ability. Therefore in many cases there is an asymmetry in the teacher–student relationship right from the start. The importance of challenging the traditional dominance of teachers in the classroom is something which Joanna Giota emphasises in her thesis *Adolescents' perceptions of school and reasons for learning*. She contends that in many

respects education is based on an adult perspective, especially that of the teacher. The adult perspective defines what is important for students at school, what they can learn and what they should do to attain the set objectives. Giota says that this can be problematic, as students may easily lose motivation for their own learning. In order to combat this, it is essential that the student perspective is considered in educational contexts.

Moira von Wright also discusses another type of asymmetry between teachers and students in the report *Initiativ och följsamhet i klassrummet* (Initiative and compliance in the classroom), in which she presents a project aimed at illustrating the opportunities of children for participation, influence and well-being in compulsory school. She claims that the asymmetry between teachers and students is one of the characteristics of the educational situation – teachers and students simply have different positions. The relationship between them can never, and should never, be completely equal and symmetrical. Responsibility for the learning environment, including results, is primarily that of the teacher. The learning environment is thus the professional responsibility of teachers, even though at present students are expected to take greater responsibility for their education. Maria Rönnlund's thesis *Demokrati och deltagande: Elevinflytande i grundskolans årskurs 7–9 ur ett könsperspektiv* (Democracy and participation: Student influence in compulsory school years 7–9 from a gender perspective) and Åsa Brumark's article *Den formella skoldemokratis roll för medborgarfostran och elevinflytande* (The importance of school democracy for civic education among

students in primary and secondary schools) show that students can participate and decide internal class issues, such as the destination of the class trip, activities during breaks and so forth. One area still open for development is the students' actual influence over their education.

Von Wright highlights and discusses this pedagogical paradox as another characteristic of the learning environment, namely its contradictory nature. On the one hand, the teacher should be responsible for, plan, manage, regulate and control the environment. On the other hand, teachers have a genuine desire to strive to give students real influence, despite the limitations that exist in the power relationship between students and teacher, with their different responsibilities and experiences. This can result in tensions in the learning environment that can obstruct the students' opportunities to participate. Similar to the researchers above, Ulrika Bergmark and Catrine Kostenius emphasise in the book *Uppskattningens kraft: lärande, etik och hälsa* (The power of appreciation: learning, ethics, and health) that based on their profession, teachers have a higher position of power in relation to students, which thus can obstruct or even prevent participation. However, they claim that the power can be used in different ways. Teachers can, for example, share some of their power with students so that they have the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes in schools. This can include how lessons are structured, or which work and reporting forms are used. This is often about teachers letting go of some of the control over learning and trusting students to be responsible for their part of the process.

Way students viewed affects teaching

If the traditional teacher-student roles are to be re-examined, then it is essential that we change the way students are viewed. The way students are viewed can sometimes be both an obstacle and an opportunity for participation and influence. In the schools that researcher Jan Grannäs has studied as a part of his thesis, there are examples of students having limited influence as both teachers and students themselves think that students have insufficient knowledge. Students stated that they do not always believe that they are mature enough to have influence over decisions or that they are too inexperienced to have opinions on different issues. Through literature studies presented in the thesis *Ideal adults, deficient children: the discourse on the child in Western philosophy*, the American education philosopher Michael Burroughs has shown that the view of children as not being competent enough has characterised Western philosophy for a long time, also affecting the view of students. The child or student is seen as a non-adult who lacks the skills of an adult and is instead considered a person undergoing change and in need of correction by elders in order to become an adult.

At the end of Per-Åke Rosvall's thesis, *En etnografisk studie om elevinflytande i gymnasieskolan* (An ethnographic study on student influence in upper secondary school), he states, '*... det vore bättre om man kunde vara med och bestämma hur det skulle göras ...*' ('... it would be better if one could be involved in how things should be done...'), asking a critical question of the current education system: what kind of human being does education encourage a student to become? Are students expected

to develop into rational, efficient and mechanical reproducing human beings who are not given opportunities for active participation and influence over educational issues? Rosvall asks himself which human concepts education is based upon – are students competent to have influence over their lives or do adults have this competence? This shows the importance of reflecting over which view of students exists in modern schooling and how it affects education.

The American researcher Alison Cook-Sather describes in her article *Student-faculty partnership in explorations of pedagogical practice: a threshold concept in academic development* that it may be useful to change the roles of teachers and students. This, however, is not an easy process as it challenges traditional views of teachers and students and how teaching should be implemented. Accordingly, there is a need for the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students to be renegotiated and changed. von Wright points out that some claim that this asymmetry is a part of the past, and that in modern schools there is equality in the teacher-student relationship. According to her, this involves drawing hasty conclusions. She calls attention to the fact that there is now a freer and more open environment for discussions in schools than in the past, and that student rights and influence have increased a great deal. From this reasoning, it follows that there is a need to highlight and illustrate approaches where the power positions of teachers and students move closer, without teachers ultimately abdicating overall power.

In the thesis *På tal om elevinflytande: Hur skolans praktik formas i pedagogers samtal* (Talking of student influence: How the practice of schools is shaped in staff conversations), Mats Danell argues that the issue of student influence cannot only be imposed on the individual teacher, but should instead be understood in relation to the institutional conditions that exist. Therefore, it follows that it is important to reflect on what opportunities teachers have for working with the objective of democracy at school. One example of change management with a focus on this specifically is the school and skills development project *Med demokrati som grund* (With democracy as a basis), which is presented in the report *Uppdrag demokrati: Ett kompetensutvecklingsprojekt inom Pajala kommuns skolor och förskolor* (The democracy mandate: A skills development project within Pajala municipality's schools and preschools). The project researchers Eva Alerby and Ann Isaksson-Pelli summarise the project's conclusions and claim that the democratic processes that are started through different school development projects must be given time to have the opportunity to develop further. If schools are to succeed with their mandate to develop democratic competence among children and youth, and in the long run also strengthen democracy in society as a whole, then the fundamental values must be *seen, felt and upheld* within the schools. An important factor for achieving this is to allocate resources so that school staff have time for discussion and reflection. That teachers have the necessary conditions for working with the schools' fundamental values issues, such as participation and influence, is important for both

student-student and student-teacher interaction. The following section discusses research on relational perspectives that can contribute to creating conditions for student participation in both decision-making and teaching activities at school.

Important to build relationships

It has been found that the interaction between teachers and students is key in terms of the issue of students being encouraged or hindered from participating and taking responsibility for their own learning process. Teachers' requirements and expectations impact the students' images of themselves and, thereby, their motivation to learn. In the research review *Individualiserad undervisning i skolan* (Individualised teaching in school), Joanna Giota emphasises that research has shown – in a convincing manner – that expectations are really important for students' school achievements. When teachers have high expectations for students, their activity and consequently their participation also increases, and in the long run this is positive for their study results. How teachers treat students is decisive as to whether genuine influence and participation occur, as well as to whether the learning environment supports student health and well-being.

In connection with this, von Wright highlights the ability of teachers to manage the pedagogical environment. By communicating with students and also managing the pedagogical environment, teachers control the students' opportunities to influence and participate. A number of different aspects of the effects of teachers

being able to create participation have emerged in the project. These concern the manner in which teachers respond to student initiative, their ability to listen to and interpret students' questions and responses, and also to provide them with appropriate and understandable instructions. Teachers' ability to create relationships with students also comes into play, as does their flexibility and pedagogical instinct, that is, the ability to adapt themselves to changing needs and situations.

The teachers' relational approach to their students is also highlighted in Grannäs' thesis. Based on student experiences, the importance of creating relationships between teachers and students is emphasised, with a focus on justice, interest and consideration. It is essential for students to feel that they are seen as unique persons in whom the teacher is personally interested. Grannäs claims that such an approach enables meetings that partially challenge the ingrained roles of teachers and students. This can create opportunities for influence and participation.

Further research that emphasises the relational perspective as a basis for participation is presented in work by Bergmark and Kostenius in the previously-mentioned *Uppskattningens kraft – lärande, etik och hälsa* (The power of appreciation: learning, ethics, and health). Based on student experiences, they stress the importance of teachers showing care and respecting them as unique individuals by seeing, hearing and inviting them to participate in their education. Creating the conditions for student participation entails sharing power and sharing responsibility. Using the students' experiences as a base when

teaching is planned and implemented is quite important to them, as is letting them have the opportunity to be active in decision-making processes related to them; they emphasise these ideas as being positive for their learning and health. Other aspects of participation that the authors illustrate are the importance of valuing the students' different abilities and skills in order to understand their perspective, as well as being able to use their experiences and needs as the education's basis.

In the book *Lyhörda lärare – professionellt relationsbyggande i förskola och skola* (Attentive teachers – professional relationship building in preschools and schools), Anneli Frelin emphasises that an important part of the teaching profession is building and maintaining educational relationships with students. Teachers in the study say that they want to show trust and feel confident in their students; they note that this is something which was not always there from the start when they met each other, but was something teachers had to work with in a deliberate manner to attain. It was also important for teachers to create friendly relationships with students: to see them, to set reasonable requirements, to show that making mistakes (both teachers and students) is human and to show empathy. Further aspects which teachers talked about in terms of their relationship building was the importance of working to strengthen the students' self-image as teachers thought that it was a good foundation for learning in schools. Frelin's study focuses on the role of teachers to create good educational relationships and therefore the role of students is only described indirectly. However, Frelin points out that relationship

building is a mutual act in which both teachers and students are active parties, something that she also saw examples of in her studies.

Based on the research of von Wright, Grannäs, Bergmark, Kostenius and Frelin, it can be said that if teachers assume a relational perspective and see a student as a subject rather than an object, opportunities are created for students to be able to participate and have influence over processes in schools.

Classroom environment, discussions and community

A classroom environment that promotes student participation is characterised by the creation of a community that is permissive, so that the voices of all students are heard. This can take place through discussions and other shared activities inside and outside the classroom. If there is an open environment for discussions where different opinions are respected and allowed to be discussed, this has a large impact on students' opportunities to develop their own democratic skills. Helene Elvstrand's study shows that good relationships in the classroom and an open classroom environment create opportunities for students to participate and influence their education. Elvstrand emphasises the importance of creating a community in schools as a foundation for participation. In this community students should be allowed to be as they are, but clearly still be a part of the group. A good classroom environment is created by students learning to make their voices heard and arguing for their opinions, yet also being open to the opinions of others; in this way,

they expand their frame of reference and learn to accept majority decisions in accordance with democratic principles. Elvstrand's study reveals that teachers in participating schools create activities that promote a sense of community. Consequently, a good sense of community is not something that happens on its own; deliberate work is required to create this.

Kent Larsson has studied and presented issues related to learning in his thesis *Samtal, klassrumsklimat och elevers delaktighet – överväganden kring en deliberativ didaktik* (Dialogue, classroom climate and student participation – some aspects of deliberative didactics). His work looks at discussions, the classroom environment and students' participation within the framework of social studies in upper secondary schools. In his thesis, he uses deliberative discussions as a starting point, which he claims have good potential for students' learning. A deliberation entails considering different options in a mutual and nuanced manner, where deliberative discussions means discussions in which different values, opinions, perceptions and arguments are pitted against each other. By using deliberative discussions in the right manner, students can acquire democratic discussion skills, an attribute that, according to Larsson, is important throughout life. However, it is important to stress that discussions should have both a purpose and knowledge content – simply talking incessantly is not enough. In her classroom observations, Elvstrand has seen that in their teaching teachers often use group discussions as a way of creating a sense of community, as well as for providing opportunities for participation. This allows students to

address subjects that they themselves want to discuss and are related to the study subject. Elvstrand noted that not all students were always a part of the discussions. This clarifies the need of deliberately working to ensure that all students are given opportunities to make their voices heard in the classroom.

Tomas Englund claims that deliberative discussions specifically have had a key role in terms of the work on the fundamental values of schools. He writes about them in the report *Deliberativa samtal som värdegrund – historiska perspektiv och aktuella förutsättningar* (Deliberative communication as constitutive values – historical perspectives and current conditions), as well as in the book *Lärandets grunder: teorier och perspektiv* (The foundations of learning – theories and perspectives). The goal of the discussions is for individuals to decide on the issue, and at the same time to reach agreement on collective values and norms. According to Englund, the possible strength of the deliberative conversation lies in that it can contribute to students' creation of meaning and knowledge building within different school subjects. However, Larsson's research shows that when the focus is on the classroom environment, certain problematic situations can arise. Examples of such situations are when one or more students remain quiet and thereby do not express their opinions or perceptions of the issue. Additionally, there are also situations where, for example, hostile perceptions are expressed. In these examples, the teacher has an important role to create conditions that contribute to all students making their voices heard, as well as addressing any hostile opinions.

Another part of a classroom environment that promotes student participation deals with which work and reporting forms are used. von Wright claims that the focus on individual development plans and students' own work seems to counteract their opportunities for influence and participation. She points out that students are often encouraged to come up with initiatives, but neither the pedagogical structure currently expressed in the schools nor the schools as an institution are able to make the most of these initiatives. This means that in practice students are instead taught submissiveness, despite the fact that both teachers and students show a strong willingness and desire for participation. It is the conditions of the situations themselves, both external and internal, that counteract these wishes. von Wright claims that teachers must regain a grip on the pedagogy; this is something which cannot take place through directives, but instead requires internal pedagogical work.

Frelin's study, described in the above-mentioned *Lyhörda lärare – professionellt relationsbyggande i förskola och skola* (Attentive teachers – professional relationship building in preschools and schools), notes that teachers want to build on the positive aspects by creating good experiences between students and teachers. This may relate to procedures in the classroom; for example, in the morning they might have excursions or use creative work methods. Teachers claimed that if students and teachers have fun together, they can overcome future setbacks more easily. Striving to create an environment where differences are accepted and seen as an asset was also something the teachers described as essential for creating a

good educational community. Finally, teachers showed deliberate work on solving conflicts and counteracting violations, as these negative acts worsen the classroom environment.

RECOMMENDED READING

Bergmark, U. & Kostenius, C. (2011). *Uppskattningskraft – lärande, etik och hälsa* (The power of appreciation: learning, ethics, and health). Lund: Student literature.

Englund, T. (2011). Lärande genom deliberativ kommunikation (Learning through deliberative communication). In Mikael Jensen, *Lärandets grunder: teorier och perspektiv* (The foundations of learning – theories and perspectives, pp. 203–222). Lund: Student literature.

von Wright, M. (2009). Initiativ och följsamhet i klassrummet. En studie i de pedagogiska villkoren för elevers inflytande, delaktighet och välbefinnande. (Initiative and compliance in the classroom. An inquiry into the pedagogical conditions for student influence, participation and well-being). Reports in pedagogy 15, Örebro: Örebro University.

Student influence on decision-making processes through class and student councils

In accordance with both the Education Act and the Work Environment Act, students are entitled to formal democratic influence through student councils and student safety representatives. These rights can also encompass aspects of the school environment that are to foster democracy among students. Class and student councils are examples of ways to organise the rights of influence and codetermination stipulated by the Education Act. This chapter presents research that describes how students' voices can be expressed through class and student councils, as well as the obstacles to making all of those voices heard.

Several studies highlight student influence through councils and voluntary activity groups. Most apparent is that getting these groups to function as forums for real student influence is a challenge. The researchers present some possible reasons for such councils not functioning, although there are also examples of real influence being gained in this way.

Challenges in making class and student councils function

Research indicates different reasons for class and student councils not always functioning. Aspects that are mentioned include organisational obstacles, inadequate structures and procedures for student influence on decision-making and ambiguous guidelines as to what students can influence.

The challenges that have been identified and mentioned in different research studies include making every student's voice heard and getting the councils to address educational and other issues considered important by students. School contact and interaction with the local community are also highlighted, and student councils could act as an important link in this context. However, council activities can be lengthy, and students do not always see the results of the changes they have suggested.

The opportunity to practice participation through class and student councils seems to be limited with respect to what students can actually influence and who participates in the decisions. Elvstrand states in her thesis that participation differs markedly between students. This is due to, among other things, individual students not taking an active role in making their voices heard, instead sitting quietly while others talk and present suggestions. Elvstrand claims that it is difficult to decide why certain students do not take the opportunity to make their voices heard. In interviews with the quiet students, she found that in all cases they did not feel overlooked by the more active students, but they accepted that the more talkative students argued their

case for them. During a single school day, students can experience different degrees of participation depending on which teachers they meet. The teachers in the study worked to different extents to encourage student participation. Sometimes, students can experience a high level of participation when they can make their voices heard, such as by providing suggestions for changes in the classroom. However, actual participation can fall rapidly if the suggestions do not result in any concrete changes, which may lead to them feeling that their suggestions are not taken seriously.

Making the voices of all students heard is something that has also been studied and problematised in the project *Mot medborgarrollen* (Towards the role of citizen), where class council discussions in years 5 and 9 have been studied. The results are presented in Åsa Brumark's *Klassrådet som språkutvecklande och demokratifrämjande aktivitet eller arena för normkonflikt och maktkamp* (The class council as a language developing and democracy promoting activity or arenas for norm conflicts and power struggle) and *Klassrådsmöten i ett genusperspektiv: Normkonflikt, positionering och alternativ skolkultur* (Class council meetings in a gender perspective: Norm conflicts, positioning and alternative school culture). The research showed that in practice class council discussions did not seem to favour student influence. It also emerged that far from all students in the studied class councils participated actively in the discussions. Roughly 20–30 per cent of the students did not participate, and of those who remained quiet the majority were girls. Among the non-active boys, however, were students involved in different forms

of counter-productive projects on the fringe of the classroom. The observations of student councils and discussions revealed that even if students as individuals are able to actively participate, the willingness, motivation and courage to express themselves in front of the entire class are lacking. The same applied to the willingness to serve as a student council representative. Similar results also emerged in Grannäs' thesis, where he studied the Swedish schools' democracy mandate at three schools based on a student perspective. In interviews, students talked about their experiences of, among other things, class and student councils. Experiences included feeling that class councils did not always function, meaning that a few students occupied too much space while others did not make their voices heard.

In light of the results of the afore-mentioned studies, it is important to emphasise that *all* students should be given the opportunity to participate and influence. Teachers in Elvstrand's study show awareness of not every student's voice being heard, and they mainly use two methods to increase these students' participation. One is to offer alternative groupings, enabling quiet students to make their voices heard in smaller groups. The other is to provide opportunities to express opinions not only in a discussion in the classroom but also by using a suggestion box, voting in the classroom with closed eyes and encouraging students to write letters to or have one-on-one discussions with their teacher. In terms of formal influence through class and student councils, Elvstrand saw that the students who feel they belong to a community in the school also have greater opportunities to

make their voices heard. Consequently, social participation is important so that students feel part of a context, so that they take the chance to make their voices heard.

The absence of educational issues and matters that are important to students is something that researchers Rönnlund and Brumark have both seen in their studies. Rönnlund investigated student and class councils as well as activity groups in her thesis. She saw that the focus of class and student councils is on internal class issues and the school environment in general. On the other hand, issues concerning education have a significantly more subordinate role, which is contrary to what students want. Students stated in surveys that they specifically want to have an influence on their education. Brumark also claims in the article *Den formella skoldemokratins roll för medborgarfostran och elevinflytande* (The importance of school democracy for civic education among students in primary and secondary schools), that in class council discussions, the focus is primarily on internal class issues and not on issues related to education per se. Despite the fact that school stakeholders comprise both adults and children, students lack the authority that could help them actively contribute with solutions to, for example, student-related problems. In other words, they lack real influence over their work. In her study of class councils, Brumark found that students did not find the issues that are addressed particularly important. Students are often encouraged to present opinions on school activities, but when it comes to issues related to lesson planning, teaching and school-wide problems, in general they do not have any say in the decisions. She also highlights that

students are not recognised as equal parties in discussions and decisions on issues related to students' school activities.

The fact that council activities can be a lengthy process is something that emerged in Linda Eriksson and Göran Bostedt's study *Elevinflytande i spänningsfältet mellan skolans kunskapsuppdrag och demokratiska uppdrag* (Students' influence on the tensions between the school's knowledge and democracy mandates). Students may have already left a school when their suggestions are implemented and, therefore, they perhaps feel that their suggestions do not result in changes. Democratic processes take time, which can cause students to despair and feel that their opportunities to impact decisions are limited. Teachers in the study claim that it is therefore important to discuss with students why democratic processes are structured this way, and that it may take time for results to be seen.

Given the results of Brumark's study, she questions the role and function of the class council. She mainly questions the class council's function as both a recruitment base for the student council and as the seat for the development of students' democratic skills and citizenship. Class councils can comprise the foundation of a school's democracy work by serving as an inclusive nursery where all students, at least theoretically, are seen and have the opportunity to make their voices heard. However, Brumark claims that most signs indicate that discussions within class councils function in a rather excluding manner. Instead of compensating for social segregation and the uneven distribution of cultural capital, which is one of the objectives of civic education in

schools, class council discussions seem to heighten these differences and inequalities.

In Rönnlund's thesis, she relates the fact that educational issues are neglected in class and student councils because of organisational and institutional factors. This is also highlighted by the Swedish National Agency for Education in their report *Med demokrati som uppdrag. En temabild om värdegrunden* (With democracy as a mandate. A thematic view of fundamental values). The problem of inadequate engagement among students in these issues is based on the fact that many compulsory and upper secondary students distrust the school as an institution and organisation in terms of their formal investments in democracy. Rönnlund also claims that the way school is organised for older students, with subject divisions, subject teachers and few occasions when students meet their mentor, form teacher or similar to discuss different subjects, can prevent educational issues being discussed on a more comprehensive level. Other reasons relate to how student opinions are handled in school organisations. Rönnlund has seen that students' thoughts and opinions tend to be attached to individual teachers. Overall, this results in a declining willingness to engage in student and class councils.

Another aspect that obstructs students' opportunities to participate and influence through class and student councils is the ambiguous regulation of students' field of influence, that is, the issues they can influence in their schools. Rönnlund claims that in the surveyed schools, the areas within which students can expect to have influence were discussed only to a limited extent. This means

that students and teachers may have different perceptions of what students may have influence over, with students not always aware of how decision-making processes take place, as well as what role they have in these processes. However, in this context it is important to note that students in the study provided proposals to increase involvement. They demand more flexible solutions where temporary groupings work towards specific objectives, and where students can participate in formulating the objectives.

In her thesis *Att fostras demokrater* (Fostering democratic citizens), Ellen Almgren calls attention to the risk of students' direct influence over school activities being taken too lightly. Decisions concerning, for example, teaching aids, timetables and school meals will influence students who join after them. If this is the case, accountability disappears – the students who participated in making the decisions cannot be held liable. Almgren claims that if accountability is lacking, it would seem that student participation and influence on school activities does not act as particularly good fostering in democracy. Almgren highlights the problem of the schools' governing documents requiring that students enjoy influence and participation while no funds are provided as a means to this end.

Despite the slightly negative picture of class and student councils painted in the research above, in the article *Den formella skoldemokratins roll för medborgarfostran och elevinflytande* (The importance of school democracy for civic education among students in primary and secondary schools) Brumark asserts that the ambition of Swedish schools to realise student democracy cannot take place within the frameworks of individual classes or

schools alone. In order to develop and expand democracy in schools, she claims that discussions must be held on an overall school level, with a focus on issues of societal relevance. School contact with society at large must increase, and this may entail both local and global issues of a political nature being included in school activities. This in turn means that students collectively are given opportunities and conditions to actually act. In other words, schools and the local community must have regular contact, and student councils could serve as links between schools and local society. This per se is not unproblematic; for instance, if the role of student councils is strengthened and linked to real social issues, organisational ambitions that accommodate representational democracy are required.

When student participation through class and student councils works

The research presented so far has shown that there are several challenges requiring further work to increase student influence and participation in day-to-day school activities. However, there is also research showing examples where students have had a real influence on decision-making. Those examples describe, among other things, situations where there have been structures for student influence. They have also shown that flexible groupings can encourage involvement and student participation, and that parental involvement in schools can broaden opportunities for students to influence and participate. When structures for influence and student participation are in place, opportunities are provided

for a real influence on school issues. Students learn how democratic decision-making works in concrete terms and they benefit from this both now, at school, and possibly in the future when joining an association, for example. The students Grannäs interviewed for his thesis felt that they benefitted from participating in class and student councils, since they served as a forum to address current issues in the class and school. One area where students have been involved and had an influence concerns the food served in the canteen, which resulted in an increased number of vegetarian choices. Students have even contributed to changes in the cafeteria's offering. Grannäs found that in cases where student participation and influence worked, parents were also actively involved in school issues. They participated in school meetings and supported their children's efforts.

In recent years, the share of students who organise themselves into student bodies has increased according to student unions. This was a more common form of influence and participation for students during, for example, the 1980s. Student bodies are based on voluntary membership in a union founded on the students' initiative, independent of school management. Here the issue of exercising influence on your own terms and conditions is a key driving force, and members involving themselves in issues of their own choosing is important. This can be compared with student councils as a form of influence where the initiative usually comes from school management, with the principal leading meetings and representatives often appointed from each class. The non-profit organisation Sveriges Elevkårer, a Swedish association

for school student unions, differentiates classroom and school situations as regards student influence and does not engage in issues students' influence and participation in their education.

The fact that flexible groupings have formed to work with different issues that students have great influence over is another example of real student influence. In her thesis, Rönnlund describes how student participation can be attained by their engagement in voluntary interest and action groups, such as environmental or equal opportunities groups. She argues that students show great commitment when they work in these groups, and that they also serve as an important part of the students' identity creation. Starting or joining an action group creates a way of positioning oneself in the school as politically active. Students stated that working in action groups was positive, as they achieved visible results with their work and had the opportunity to develop their democratic skills, especially regarding communication and leadership. Other positive experiences included the work resulting in greater knowledge of power structures and greater willingness to influence other school issues in the future. Rönnlund's thesis shows clearer positive aspects of participation and influence for students who involved themselves in voluntary interest groups than those who were active in the student council. This may be due to how the groups were created, how students were recruited and their work methods, with self-determination being very important. Both boys and girls were included in both interest groups that Rönnlund investigated, although a majority of the participants were girls.

This result can be seen as an example of how normative thinking characterises the involvement of boys and girls in school. The fact that there are a large number of students who do not participate in influence processes is a problem, according to Rönnlund, as they miss an important part of their education. Therefore, more student groups need to be involved in influence processes.

As described earlier in this section, there are both obstacles and opportunities for students to influence decisions in their school by working in different groups. The next chapter highlights students' participation in their education.

RECOMMENDED READING

Brumark, Å. (2010). *Den formella skoldemokratin roll för medborgarfostran och elevinflytande* (The importance of school democracy for civic education among students in primary and secondary schools). *Utbildning & Demokrati*, (Education & democracy) 19(2), 77–96.

Grannäs, J. (2011). *Framtidens demokratiska medborgare. Om ungdomar, medborgarskap och demokratifostran i svensk skola* (Future democratic citizens: young people on citizenship and democratic fostering in Swedish schools). Doctoral thesis. Uppsala: Uppsala University.

Rönnlund, M. (2011). *Demokrati och deltagande. Elevinflytande i grundskolans årskurs 7–9 ur ett könsperspektiv*. (Democracy and participation. Student influence in lower secondary schools from a gender perspective). Doctoral thesis, Umeå University.

Active student education

There are clear directives that schools should promote fundamental democratic values, and this necessitates student participation in and influence on education. In its *General advice for planning and implementing teaching*, the Swedish National Agency for Education provides guidance on how teachers should structure their work, based on the curriculum. For student participation and influence to become a reality in schools, the guidance emphasises that in teaching, teachers should use students' interests, experiences and views about what their education includes as a starting point. The planning is based on the aim and key content of curricula and the skills that students should be given the opportunity to develop while retaining clear links to their own experiences. According to the syllabus, teachers should be responsible for '...all students having a real influence on work methods, forms of work and content of their education and ensuring that this influence increases with rising age and maturity' and that 'by participating in planning and evaluation of day-to-day learning and having the opportunity to choose courses, subjects, themes and activities, students can develop their ability to exercise influence and take responsibility.' The *General advice for planning and implementing teaching* also emphasises that students can have an active role in the assessment of knowledge. If students participate in this assessment, it

creates conditions for them to take greater responsibility for their studies and to develop a familiarity with what is assessed, and this is positive for their learning.

The following illustrates how students can participate in their education by having an active role in its planning and the opportunity to use student-active work methods, as well as the existing challenges for encouraging their participation.

Despite the fact that fostering democratic principles in schools is the most essential aspect of the fundamental values of the curricula, in the book *Demokratiska arbetsformer – värdegrundsarbete i skolan* (Democratic methods – working with fundamental values in school) Ann S. Pihlgren claims that student participation and influence in practice are not particularly widespread in Swedish schools. We should reflect on this conclusion in order to attain a more nuanced image of schools' work on participation. In our experience as teachers and school developers, we have seen that there are many examples of how teachers and students work with participation in education through, for example, joint planning, student-active work methods and students having an active role in assessment processes. In addition, some teachers have documented their work on participation and influence on education, which will be described later in the review. However, we can confirm Pihlgren's view that positive aspects of participation and influence on education have not been illustrated in the research to a particularly large extent. The research that exists often discusses the problems and obstacles of participation in education. This makes it essential to reflect on what is required to

overcome challenges in order to attain the clear objectives of curricula for students having the opportunity to participate and have a real influence over their education and schooling.

Challenges of making students active in their education

In terms of students' participation in and influence on their education, a couple of aspects should be highlighted. One is the opportunities of students to actually be involved in and engaged the activities of schools. The second is whether students take the opportunities which are provided for active participation in the education and then have influence over their own learning. In the book *Ansvar – hur lätt är det?* (Responsibility – how easy is it?) Marianne Dovemark discusses and presents participation based on the aspect of freedom of choice. She claims that often students' influence covers *when*, *where* and *how much*. Consequently someone else (the teacher) still tells the students what is right and wrong and what is important. Whether students choose to participate and have influence largely depends on which work methods prevail at that time at the school in question.

Per-Åke Rosvall, in his thesis titled '*...det vore bättre om man kunde vara med och bestämma hur det skulle göras...*' – *En etnografisk studie om elevinflytande i gymnasieskolan* ('...it would be better if one could be involved in how things should be done...' - An ethnographic study on student influence in upper secondary school), has studied students' influence over the content and structure of education in two upper secondary school classes in the

social sciences programme and the vehicle programme. Results show that there are few occasions within both programmes where students take the opportunity to influence the content and structure of their education, despite the fact that they expressed dissatisfaction with it in certain respects. Rosvall discusses possible explanations for students not making their voices heard. In the interviews, students said that they were scared of being called a 'nerd' if they made suggestions for improvement, also saying that they did not know each other to the same extent in upper secondary as in lower years, and this inhibited their initiative to participate and influence their education. Another cause that Rosvall discusses is that teaching in the studied classes tended to be focused on future influence, which may have a negative impact on student participation and influence with a here-and-now perspective. The results also showed the lack of a formal organisation for encouraging influence. The most common way of exercising influence and participating in the structuring of their education was one-on-one contact between students and teachers. Rosvall asserts that the way the education is organised may block opportunities for students to participate and influence. In the studied classes, he noted a focus on factual issues and skills training with fewer opportunities for critical review, reflection and analysis, all of which are needed to participate and exert influence.

In the thesis *Elevers möjligheter att ta ansvar för sitt lärande i matematik. En skolstudie i postmodern tid* (Students' opportunities to assume responsibility for their own learning with regard to mathematics.

A classroom-based study in a postmodern era), Lili-Anne Kling Sackerud illustrates and discusses the school mandate to create conditions for students' opportunities and abilities to assume responsibility and participate in school activities. Kling Sackerud studied, among other things, how students, teachers and principals express and realise the issue of responsibility for learning, both generally and more specifically concerning learning in mathematics. In terms of student influence, this is found to different extents in the classes studied, although this influence is clearest in the earlier school years and diminishes thereafter. The influence that students have over their educational situation is mainly related to the pace and order of their different assignments, as well as how they should work with the assignments. However, mathematics teaching is mainly governed by the textbook and the teacher's role becomes that of helping students progress through the assignments in this book. However, Lili-Anne Kling Sackerud claims that there has been a change in school activities, as earlier the focus was on shared and collective experiences, while the current education focuses more on personal work – individual work methods. According to Kling Sackerud, one of the challenges faced by schools is how to decrease dependency on teaching aids in mathematics and to instead strengthen the didactic role of teachers. Another aspect is how teachers are to share their experience within and between different classes and years. The fact that education tends to have too large an individual focus is not specific to the subject of mathematics, but is something that applies to several school subjects. Joanna Giota also emphasises this

in her research review, when she stresses that individual work methods have had a prominent role in recent years.

There are several limiting factors for student participation and influence in education. It has emerged in, among other works, Maria Rönnlund's thesis that knowledge objectives and grading criteria may be limiting as they strongly govern subject content. One result of this is that students are given few opportunities to negotiate what their education should include and cover. Provisions and decisions at a municipal level may also be a limiting force, and this was shown clearly in student councils when, for example, school meals were discussed. It may be the case that students would like to have organic school meals, but the municipality's procurement cannot accommodate this. The fact that teachers did not take their responsibility for conveying the issues or that they opposed the students' suggestions was also perceived as an obstacle to student participation and influence.

Examples of active student education

This section presents concrete examples of how teachers and students have worked with student participation and influence within different subjects in schools, using different work methods. The examples that are highlighted and discussed are the results of different research studies, as well as documented development work based on the experiences of teachers. Examples involve allowing students to participate in the entire process when teaching is planned, implemented and evaluated.

Student-centered work method

There are several examples of different work methods that promote student participation and influence. In her book *Demokratiska arbetsformer – värdegrundsarbete i skolan* (Democratic methods – working with fundamental values in school), Pihlgren describes student-active work methods of various forms, such as in conjunction with course planning, interdisciplinary project work and student-led personal development dialogues. Pihlgren asserts that for student-active work methods to function, it is necessary that the teacher, as in all other school work, is thoughtful and considers matters professionally. In concrete terms, this may entail teachers planning lessons so that students are given the opportunity to consider and reflect on their own thoughts about the issues addressed.

The results of Linda Eriksson and Göran Bostedt's study *Elevinflytande i spänningsfältet mellan skolans kunskapsuppdrag och demokratiska uppdrag* (Students' influence on the tensions between the school's knowledge and democracy mandates) have illustrated the importance of education using students' issues, interests and experiences as a baseline. It is important that teachers are aware of this and create concrete strategies for active student education by finding out about students' experiences, either through discovery or by actively asking about them. The students' experiences are then linked to the key content of curricula. School personnel who were a part of the study emphasise that problem-based work methods and interdisciplinary work engaged the students, as the work method could clearly be linked to students' experiences and interests, which was perceived

as boosting their motivation. The study also points out that student influence can be strengthened by giving them the opportunity to view the learning process as a whole and putting the knowledge in context. Among other things, this may entail collaboration with the local community. If students consider school work meaningful, it motivates their learning. Collaboration with society may, for example, comprise finding real recipients for the students' work. Project work can be presented to an audience, such as parents or even other students.

In their study, Eriksson and Bostedt also stress that participation in the form of student activity can be attained by offering them choices in their education. The choices may entail students deciding how to attain their objectives or at what pace they should complete predetermined tasks. Teachers noted that it is essential for students to practise the ability to choose, as part of becoming independent, taking responsibility and making decisions. However, according to the teachers there are restrictions on freedom of choice. As many activities are performed in groups, students are not always able to choose freely what suits them as individuals. Teachers state that younger students are given fewer choices than older students, as they do not have the same levels of knowledge and experience.

At the end of the 1990s, the Swedish National Agency for Education had a development area, *Student influence and work in schools*, in which 41 schools across Sweden participated. Experiences from the work are presented in *Inflytandets villkor: En rapport om 41 skolors arbete med elevinflytande* (The terms and conditions of influence:

A report on the work of 41 schools on student influence). Experiences from schools indicate that student influence encourages personal responsibility and the desire to learn. Key to this work is that schools worked with student-active methods, putting students centre stage. Students were involved in both the planning and the assessment of their education. It was also important to talk to students about which objectives they should attain so that they understand them, thereby enabling students, together with their teachers, to find ways of achieving this. The different schools held discussions about what students would have influence over. The report contains examples of students being allowed to choose where to work, which assignment to work with, and the order in which to conduct their different assignments. In order to avoid too large a focus on individual assignments, many schools chose to use joint project work. Teachers often decided the project theme and learning objectives, with the students then having some influence over planning and implementation in the sense that they could decide which work and presentation forms to use, which classmates to work with and finally how to evaluate the project. When the schools were not working with projects, it was common for the teaching to be characterised by student-active work methods that were based on the students' own issues and interests. For teachers, this could entail striking a balance between students' issues and interests and curricular objectives. The student-active work methods could even entail creative and investigative work, role-playing and reality-based assignments to be conducted either within or outside the schools.

Flipped Classroom challenges the view of learning. *Flipped Classroom* is a work method that was introduced in schools both nationally and internationally. In the book *Flipped Classroom – det omvända arbetssättet* (*Flipped Classroom – the inverted work method*), Daniel Barker describes his own use of the method while teaching at an upper secondary school. He notes that there is no clear definition of the *Flipped Classroom* concept, but that it is essential that students prepare for the lessons by, for example, viewing the teachers' recorded lessons and then working with the content in lesson time with teachers. Normally, teachers tend to present a topic in the classroom and then assign homework for later processing without the teacher's help – and in the best case scenario with the support of a parent. The inverted work method means that the presentation and the homework switch places. *Flipped Classroom* allows students to use the teachers' recorded lessons as many times as they want, and then process the applicable material together with the teacher in the classroom. Barker describes how the work method puts students' learning centre stage and how students participate more in their learning, with partially new roles for teachers and students. Teachers must now clearly support students in acquiring new knowledge, while students are expected to play an active role in their learning. This work method also entails a degree of fairness, in that all students have the same opportunities to process knowledge during lessons. In traditional teaching, students can benefit from teaching during lesson time, but when the information is to be processed at home, they may lack the support they need to develop.

Barker has also experienced some challenges with the new work method, and these include the initial time-consuming preparations, as lessons need to be recorded and, consequently, teachers may need to master new software to make these recordings. Furthermore, all students might not view the recording that forms the basis of the lesson and, consequently, may have problems keeping up during the lesson. So it is important to work together with the students to find ways for them to prepare for lessons. However, all in all it can be said that the *Flipped Classroom* method can challenge how we view learning and can serve as a way of increasing student participation in education.

Student-led conferences and assessment

Another way to work towards strengthening student participation is to allow students themselves to lead Parent-Teacher conferences. These conferences are sometimes criticised for being undemocratic, as teachers have traditionally controlled the dialogues, both what is addressed and how the dialogue is conducted. The consequence is that students have not been given much influence over the dialogues and have not always felt particularly involved in a dialogue related to their learning. However, there has been a change recently. In many schools around Sweden, student-led conferences have been introduced. In his research, Michael Tholander has investigated how student-led conferences function in practice. In the article *Student-led conferencing as democratic practice*, he presents different arguments for using student-led conferences in schools. The democratic argument is about

enabling greater student participation in the dialogues and thereby equalising the power imbalance between students and teachers. The pedagogical argument is that students' learning is improved if they are allowed to participate in the dialogues, both to collect data beforehand (including self-evaluation) and to be active during the conference itself. Tholander also points out that there is an administrative argument for student-led conferences, which has not been equally emphasised in previous research in the field. This argument maintains that student-led conferences are a way of streamlining activities for the teacher, as students perform self-evaluations and help collect data for the dialogues.

In the report *Elevledda utvecklingssamtal: Effekter efter fem och tio år* (Student-led development dialogues: Effects after five and ten years), Ann S. Pihlgren describes how work on student-led conferences can be structured. The work covers approximately 1–2 school weeks where students conduct self-evaluations in every subject, discussing the results of the self-evaluations with their teachers. Furthermore, they discuss which interim objectives students have set for attaining the curriculum objectives, as well as what should be done to support their fulfilment. The student and teacher then decide which of the student's work should be shown during the conference with their parent/guardian. This work should show the student's development in a clear manner. In order to prepare the student for the conference, it is practised in a role-play where a classmate can act as the parent/guardian.

When this has been conducted, each student leads their own conference where teachers and parents are also present, based on a set agenda:

1. Written assessments from teachers are reviewed, including proposed development objectives
2. The student's work is presented and described
3. Specific development objectives are determined
4. The meeting concludes with an evaluation of the dialogue.

Pihlgren claims that teachers function as support, but rarely participate actively during steps 1, 2 and 4; instead, the conference is led by the student with the parent/guardian. During step 3 of the conference, the teacher always actively participates, as according to the Education Act the teacher should participate when objectives are formulated (if not participating throughout the conference). This means that a couple of student-led conferences can be held in parallel, and the teacher can move between them.

When Pihlgren investigated how students, teachers, parents/guardians and principals experienced student-led conferences through group interviews and surveys, she found that everyone felt that students attained a deeper understanding of their learning and the steps that must be taken for further development to take place. The student-led conferences enabled a more even distribution of power between teachers and students, as students had an active role in comparison to traditional teacher-led conferences. By means of the dialogue, students and

parents/guardians also partially assumed a different role towards each other – from a child who will be raised by a parent/guardian in charge to a person who is an expert in their own learning and demonstrates their skills to their parent/guardian, who in turn becomes a dialogue partner. The parents'/guardians' understanding of school activities and student learning was also strengthened. Students, teachers, parents/guardians and school management also emphasised that student influence increased due to the student-led conferences. Teachers say that these assessments involve a focus being placed on student learning throughout the year, and that the content of the dialogues forms a basis for continued planning of class work. This was also confirmed by the students.

In his study, Michael Tholander has studied eight student-led conferences that were videoed and later analysed. Similar to Pihlgren, he found that these assessments resulted in students becoming real participants. Students were visible players during the assessments as they were a part of and produced the data for the occasions in the form of their self-evaluations. By talking about their self-evaluations, students had more scope to talk than in teacher-led conferences. Tholander also describes students' honesty when talking about their problems, which is not always the case in teacher-led conferences where the teacher sometimes uses woolly reformulations of students' problems. This honesty can create potential for highlighting students' opportunities for development. As everyone in attendance is made aware of the student's problems, measures can be implemented. An open dialogue between the home and school is also created.

Student-led conferences also entail several obstacles and challenges. Teachers in Pihlgren's study felt that they are initially more time-consuming, as they should be prepared together with the students. For the dialogues to be successful, it is important that the teachers understand the didactic concepts behind the method, such as how knowledge is constructed together and that student influence and participation have key roles in learning.

Tholander also addresses obstacles and challenges associated with the method. The predetermined agenda that students used as a guide when leading the assessments made it more difficult to address issues that they themselves wanted to talk about, such as their social development, achievements or thoughts about the future. Despite the fact that the school in Tholander's survey practised student-led conferences, the study shows that teachers often indirectly controlled the discussions. Teachers decided which problems were the most serious and urgent to remedy, often steering the student towards desirable responses and development paths, and often having the final word by summarising the discussions and establishing which development objectives should be in focus. In many cases, the student-led conferences tended to have an individual focus – that the problems of students were related to them as individuals and not the school's role of creating favourable conditions for learning. It is important to take this into account when student-led conferences are conducted. If teachers are aware of the risk of too large an individual focus in terms of identifying the causes of problems or finding possible development paths, they can actively promote alternate

approaches that put the student in a sociocultural context. The challenges and obstacles that both Pihlgren and Tholander address illustrate the asymmetrical power relationship that still exists between teachers and students, as described earlier. Such a power relationship cannot be changed completely so that it becomes completely symmetrical since the teacher, despite everything, is the professional and is responsible for the children's education. At the end of his study, Tholander advises teachers who want to work with student-led conferences that they should encourage students to help structure the agenda, as this ensures greater influence and participation. In this way, student-led conferences can be controlled based on the students' own interests and agendas.

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Pihlgren, A. (2012). *Demokratiska arbetsformer – värdegrundsarbete i skolan*. (Democratic methods – working with fundamental values in school). Lund: Student literature.

Effects of student participation and influence

The last ten years has seen a marked increase in the amount of research illustrating and discussing student participation and influence in schools. National and international research shows ties between student participation and relationships, learning, and real change, as well as motivation and responsibility. Consequently, in this chapter different examples of research illustrating the effects of student participation and influence in schools will be presented and discussed.

Student participation in decision-making processes – relationships, learning and real change

Based on Nigel Thomas' first definition of participation in the form of decision-making, the initial section in this chapter will illustrate research that has analysed the effects of student participation in decision-making processes. Research reveals several positive effects of student participation, as well as some negative effects. Being able to participate and influence is beneficial not only for the students themselves but even for the teachers in many cases. Students' participation in and influence on their education is important, both for student-teacher interaction and for schools as organisations.

In the article *Effects of student participation in decision making at school: A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research*, researchers Ursula Manger and Peter Novak have summarised and analysed previously published international research results on student participation to illustrate the effects on the collective decision-making processes of schools that impact students as a group. The researchers conducted a search of international empirical research articles published in scientific journals with a focus on student participation in decision-making.

The search criteria used to identify articles to include in the study were that the articles:

- covered research with children and youths in the age group 5–19 who were attending a municipal or independent school
- investigated participation based on the researchers' definition
- used quantitative or qualitative methods for measuring the effects of student participation in decision-making processes
- provided information on student participation and correlating effects of their participation
- were written in either English or German.

After the researchers searched through 3,102 titles and summaries and evaluated 242 articles, they found that 32 publications fulfilled their criteria.

Results show different effects of participation in decision-making: for the student, for the teacher, for student-teacher interaction, and for schools as an organisation. In more than half of the studies, it was found

that students developed *life skills* when they participated in decision-making. Life skills could include, for example, a feeling of responsibility, communication skills, leadership qualities or the ability to listen to others and express themselves. More than one third of the studies showed that self-esteem and social status among students increased, and that students developed knowledge of both democracy and civic issues. Almost one third of the studies showed that students' learning and knowledge increased if they had the opportunity to participate. Four studies also showed that another positive effect of participation was that personal health and health-related behaviour improved. The research compiled by Manger and Novak thereby shows that the positive effects of student participation are significant, and yet there were also some negative effects. For example, students felt disappointment or frustration when they could not make their voices heard or when their suggestions did not result in change. One study also showed that student participation in decision-making may result in a greater sense of stress among students when they serve as leaders in their class or school.

The analysis by Manger and Novak of previous research showed that in more than one third of the studies, student-teacher interaction increased, with both groups exhibiting greater understanding of each other. One quarter of the studies also showed that relationships between students improved, such as in the form of greater understanding and appreciation of each other. Furthermore, a few studies showed that work on student participation resulted in improved relationships between

teachers, with greater collaboration as a result, for example. A small number of studies addressed certain negative effects of student participation within teacher groups, such as teachers feeling questioned and challenged by students in a manner that they considered negative.

In terms of the effects of student participation on the school as an organisation, in one fifth of the studies the analysis shows that real change had been seen, such as in changes and improvements to rules and procedures. More than three quarters of the studies showed greater involvement in their own school including, for example, a better attitude towards the school, a greater sense of being a part of the school community and greater happiness and satisfaction. Roughly half of the studies reported that the school and classroom environment had improved and that bullying and racism had declined. In more than two thirds of the studies, students felt that they were listened to and when they were allowed to be a part of decision-making, they had even greater acceptance of the decisions that were made.

There is also some national research illustrating the effects of student participation, though it is not very extensive. Björn Ahlström has conducted a study in compulsory school, *Student Participation and School Success: The relationship between participation, grades and bullying among 9th grade students in Sweden*, where he investigates the connections between participation, bullying and academic achievements (grades). In this case, student participation is about being able to communicate with others, expressing opinions and arguing for them. It is also about listening to and respecting the opinions

of others, working in a democratic manner, being able to think critically, and actively participating in conflict resolution. The results show that if students are given the opportunity of participation, they have a higher chance of attaining high grades, and schools with high participation have a low level of bullying.

The fact that student health improves if students participate in school activities has also been confirmed by Maria Warne in the thesis *Där eleverna är: Ett arenaperspektiv på skolan som en stödjande miljö för hälsa* (Where students are: An arena perspective on the school as a supportive environment for health). The results show, among other things, that students' experiences of good health could be related to a high level of participation in the classroom, which in this case meant that students had the opportunity to make their voices heard and to influence decisions about the shared school environment. In some cases, the students also conveyed the issues to municipal decision-makers. In cases where students managed to convey their requests to decision-makers at a local level (for example, the principal included the students' request for better computers in next year's budget) or municipal level (request for a multi-purpose stadium at the school addressed in the recreation committee), they felt a sense of pride and respect, which also contributed to positive health experiences.

As mentioned above, student participation in decision-making processes has some positive effects that impact relationships, learning and real change.

Active student education – motivation and responsibility

Based on Thomas' second definition of participation, where participation is described as students being active in their education, this part of the chapter will illustrate research showing the role of participation in teaching for students' motivation and responsibility for their learning. Participation, motivation and responsibility are key parts of a learning process, each affecting the other. Joanna Giota has found that motivation and the desire to learn are generated in relation to a number of factors, such as the amount of schoolwork, variation within that work and whether students can relate to the work and find it meaningful. Schoolwork should be interesting and challenging, as well as manageable for students. Therefore it is important that students feel that they have control over their learning. In turn, control over their own learning process results in interest in and motivation for schoolwork, thus contributing to motivation for learning. In this way, motivation is linked to participation in the form of student-active education.

According to Giota, the importance of feedback is highlighted in all motivation theories. Forms of feedback that give students information on where they are in terms of academic achievement are important for motivation, to clarify which steps should be taken to attain the objectives in question. In addition, such feedback can make students aware of their own skills and this in turn results in students having a more positive view of themselves and their opportunities – which is essential for feeling motivated.

John Hattie, an education researcher from New Zealand, conducted the study *Visible Learning*, which also illustrates the importance of feedback in student learning. He highlights the importance of teachers having a view of learning and education based on student perspectives and telling students about their pedagogical strategies. Their teaching foundation should be based on learning theories that emphasise communication and collaboration rather than individual learning – student-active education. He claims that feedback in particular is one of the aspects of teaching that has the strongest effect on student achievements. He explains how formative assessment is a generic name for many types of feedback on study results. Hattie has seen how feedback that takes into account students' experiences of their learning contributes to influence over that learning, thereby encouraging them to follow their own development, including metacognitive skills. This type of student-centred and student-controlled feedback benefits study performance.

Hattie emphasises three questions in connection with feedback: Where are you going? How are you going? Where to next? The questions are important to ask of both teachers and students, so that both perspectives are highlighted. It is worth noting in this context that Hattie distinguishes between feedback *to* and *from* students. He stresses that it is essential for students to provide feedback to the teacher about how they understand their education and learning, so that the teacher has the opportunity to understand how the education is understood by students.

According to Giota's research review, the division of responsibility in learning also has an impact on student motivation. It may entail to what extent students are allowed to participate and influence their education: assignments, material, work methods, presentation forms or pace of learning. If students are given the opportunity to choose how and when different activities should be conducted, their interest and involvement in the assignments increases, and they assume more responsibility for their own learning. However, there are challenges in student responsibility. In the research review, Giota emphasises that students must have the necessary willingness, conditions and skills for making active choices. These challenges should not be seen as a static condition; rather that students can gradually develop their skills to assume greater responsibility for their learning.

Some critical voices claim that not all students have the conditions for taking responsibility for their own learning. Håkan Jenner's report *Motivation och motivationsarbete i skola och behandling* (Motivation and motivational work in schools and treatment), however, shows the opposite: if underachievers are allowed to take responsibility, over time they can become successful in their learning. Thus, all students have the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning if they receive the necessary support from their teachers. The role of the teacher thus becomes one of encouraging students' interest and curiosity and desire to learn. In discussions about responsibility for learning, the teacher always has overall responsibility for ensuring that objectives are attained. Moreover, in order to increase or maintain student

motivation, it is essential that they are given concrete opportunities to participate and act independently. If the opposite happens, with education governed by external factors and not by students themselves, student motivation declines.

In her research review, Giota says that motivation researchers seem to agree that student motivation is, to a large extent, impacted by “the interaction with the teacher, trusting relationships, the teacher’s approach and attitude towards the student’s resources, the classroom environment and the teacher’s teaching style”. As participation is closely linked to motivation, these motivation boosters can serve as conditions for encouraging student participation.

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Thoughts about the future

The knowledge review concludes with a few thoughts about the future, including how students' voices can be a part of school development. Professional development needs, organisational conditions for furthering participation work and the importance of further pedagogical research highlighting student participation and influence are also discussed.

Student voices – an important part of school development

In order to provide a description of the current situation of Swedish schools, both national and international surveys are conducted. However, the survey results are not the only descriptions to use as a basis when schools are discussed and debated and changes are made. Based on the strong emphasis on democratic values, it is essential that students themselves can have a say and that schools really listen to them. School development should be based on the schools' mandate, as expressed in the governing documents for schools, as well as on teacher and student experiences, so that staff, teachers and students can develop the schools together. Here are a few examples of student involvement being an important reason for school development to be spotlighted and discussed.

Students have an important role in school development; this has been highlighted by researchers both

nationally and internationally. For example, in the article *Theorizing student voice: values and perspectives*, the British researchers Carol Robinson and Carol Taylor claim that it is possible to change a school's organisation by listening to experiences, not only of adults but also of students. If you really listen to students and they are given the opportunity to impact their learning environment, their voices and involvement can result in change and improvement in the teaching environment. In her thesis, *Adolescents' perceptions of school and reasons for learning*, Joanna Giota allowed students to talk about their experiences of school and the reasons for attending school. She stresses that students provide profound insights into school activities and their own learning, something that adults, perhaps, do not always expect from them. Her analysis shows that students truly reflect on their experiences and that they have broad and deep knowledge of conditions in schools. For example, they reflect on the role school plays for their future lives as adults, the classroom teaching environment, their teachers' professional competences and the expectations of parents and friends, as well as the historical, financial and organisational functions of school.

If student voices, experiences and reflections are taken seriously, school development will benefit. Therefore it is important to allow students to participate in the process of developing schools as a learning environment. Student experiences and reflections are also important aspects in pedagogical research.

In the project '*Skolan suger*' ... *eller?* (School stinks ... right?), conducted by Eva Alerby, Ylva Backman, Ulrika Bergmark, Åsa Gardelli, Krister Hertting, Catrine

Kostenius and Kerstin Öhrling, students in school years 6–9 were asked to reflect on their experiences of good learning and their visions of the best learning environment. The results of the project show, among other things, a mutual relationship between students' well-being and their learning. This means that good health is positive for student learning and that the experience of learning something also results in students feeling better. Students also said that they wanted to have influence and participate in their education, such as via different work methods than those being used. They also state that they would like teaching to take place in different locations, both inside and outside the school walls.

Within the project, several different methods were used to express student voices: written reflections, interviews and visual stories. Teachers and principals used similar methods to, in a concrete manner, find out about students' experiences and allow their voices to be heard in school activities, such as in school-improvement. In this process it is important that students are allowed to make their voices heard in different ways. Illustrating experiences with visual stories, for example, is related to a method called *Photo Voice*, and is used in research with the aim of promoting reflection, participation and involvement. According to Maria Warne, who used *Photo Voice* in her research study, the method has three main goals: allow people to shape their everyday lives, encourage people to reflect on important aspects in an environment, and allow the experiences and thoughts of people to reach those who decide on activities. Even though this method is used in research, there are great

opportunities to use visual stories in teaching. With the aid of visual stories, teachers and principals can systematically collect students' experiences as a starting point for real change management. It is important that students have an opportunity to make their voices heard and that they are listened to, and that students' opinions result in real change when necessary.

Long-term work with several challenges

Despite the fact that school is emphasised as an important place for participation and the fostering of democratic attitudes, there are difficulties in achieving this. For the school to truly foster democratic attitudes, teachers must be given the opportunity and necessary conditions to jointly plan and reflect on school activities and how to increase student participation. Developing real student influence and participation demands long-term work, and it takes time before results are seen in day-to-day activities. In order to increase student participation, it is also important to create forums and meeting places in schools where students and teachers can meet and air their views on teaching and education. This helps teachers give student perspectives and experiences a key role in their teaching methods.

There is a need for further research illustrating how teachers and students work with student participation, particularly how students gain influence over and are actively involved in their education. It has emerged that there are schools in Sweden that work successfully with student participation, but this is an under-researched area.

The research referenced in this knowledge review asserts that student participation and influence in schools

have increased in recent years. Despite this, there are still some challenges to further increasing student influence and participation. This is particularly true today when tensions between different parts of the teaching mission can be seen, due to the greater focus on measurable knowledge in Swedish schools. According to national and international surveys, the academic achievements of Swedish students have declined over the past decade. As a consequence, Swedish governments have initiated and implemented a number of reforms, including additional and more frequent national tests in more subjects, a renewed grading system with more grading stages, teacher certification and career services. All with the aim of improving academic achievements and the appeal of the teaching profession.

While it is important to measure students' academic achievements in order to help them further develop their knowledge, an overly unilateral focus on measurements and results can impact which knowledge and work methods are prioritised. As a teacher or principal, it is easy to focus on measurable results in different subjects, as student knowledge levels are measured regularly. This may result in students' opportunities to develop knowledge from a wider perspective being restricted. Subsequently, there is a risk that school staff has little opportunity to work with the entire school mandate – to both improve student knowledge and skills and actively work with democratic values, such as participation and influence. It is important that we endeavour to attain a healthy balance between different aspects of the mandate. And it is important that this work includes students so that

together with school staff they can find good ways to increase student participation. To summarise, we need professional development, improved organisational conditions for developing student participation and influence, and further pedagogical research illustrating these points in particular.

To conclude, an important remark from one of the students who participated in the study *Skolan suger... eller?* (Backman et al., 2012, p. 25):

I want people to listen and react. Not just talk nonsense and then go home, have a cup of coffee and think: 'The students came up with some interesting things, but I will think about it later ...'

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FORSKNING
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Democratic values, student participation and student influence should be as central to education as knowledge of different school subjects. This is clearly stated in the Swedish Education Act and the Swedish curricula. This review of existing knowledge presents research on participation and influence and shows how it is possible to work with student influence over decision-making processes as well as student active education. It is aimed at those working in compulsory school and upper secondary school as well as anyone interested in knowing more about student participation.

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