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Minä oppin työskentelemään ystäväni kanssa ja Minä kiistan : Oppilaiden osallisuuden kokemuksia Monitieteisessä oppimismallissa

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“I learned to cooperate with my friends and there were no quarrels”: Pupils’ experiences of participation in a multidisciplinary learning module

Abstract

In this article we analyse how and if participation affects the learning experiences of pupils. Our research questions are: 1. What constituted positive learning experiences for pupils in a multidisciplinary learning module? 2. How do the methods used in this study give pupils an opportunity to express negative emotions and participate in developing learning experiences? The data of this practitioner research consists of 80 photographs, 23 picture books and 23 interviews.

The positive experiences of the project were social interaction, autonomy of peer groups and sense of capability and competence which relate to social participation. The picture book-interview method revealed pupils’ negative experiences that related to learning how to work in a group and perform the tasks at hand.

Key words: participation, curriculum, multidisciplinary learning module, peer relations, practitioner research

Introduction

Promotion of pupils' participation is one of the key missions in basic education in Finland. The current national core curriculum given in 2014 emphasises the right of every pupil to participate in schools, echoing the increasing impact of the children's rights perspective in Finnish legislation and in child policy in general (Hakalehto, 2015; Kiilakoski, 2017). It emphasises both the social and political dimensions of participation by stating that basic education should reinforce the pupils' positive identities as human beings, learners and community members and promote participation. It should also promote a sustainable way of living and growth into active citizens who use their democratic rights and freedoms responsibly. The Finnish national core curriculum set by [the](#) Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) also states that participating in civic activity is a basic precondition for an effective democracy. These aspects of participation given in the Finnish core curriculum share the same value basis with literature on children's rights and the participation of children and the young in their growth environment, which emphasises the active role of each and every child (Hart, 1992; Kiilakoski, Gretscher & Nivala, 2012; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001; UNCRC, 1989).

Participation has been emphasised in Finnish child and youth policy since 1997, when the concept was first introduced to highlight the need to develop the role of citizens in decision-making (Kiilakoski, 2017). Looking at the development of national core curricula reveals the rising impact of participation and the changed emphasis on the scope and quality of participation in schools. In 2004 the core curriculum had a multidisciplinary subject called 'Participatory citizenship and entrepreneurship', the goal of which was to develop the capacities needed to participate and promote the development of pupils as citizens. This was seen as preparing pupils to act in wider society, not so much in the school itself (FNBE 2004, 40–41). Transversal competence (former a multidisciplinary subject) in 2014 is now called 'Participation: influencing and building a sustainable future'. The emphasis is on school itself, which is seen as a site where one learns the skills of making an impact on a democratic society. The duty of schools is to enforce the participation of *every* pupil. (FNBE 2014, 24.) Similar change in the emphasis (from the wider society to schools themselves) is seen when a curriculum describes school culture. In 2004, the core curriculum stated that pupils should be given an *opportunity to participate* in creating and developing school culture (FNBE 2004, 16). In 2014 it is stated the school culture should be *based on [pupils'](#) participation and*

listening to [their](#) voices (FNBE 2014, 35). The change in the curricular thinking has meant that participation has moved to the centre of education and has become one of the guiding principles of schooling. Therefore, participation should be connected to teaching and learning in schools, while the exact methods have been left to the decisions made at the local level.

The current national curriculum also emphasises the need to offer pupils multidisciplinary learning modules by using the methods of phenomenon-based learning (Symeonidis & Schwartz, 2016). One of the most controversial changes in the new national core curriculum [is](#) related to teaching multidisciplinary learning modules: since August 2016 each pupil must be provided an opportunity to join at least one multidisciplinary learning module per school year. The module must be long enough to ensure that the participatory goals set in the curriculum can be reached. That has brought about a need, first, to learn how to implement multidisciplinary learning modules and, second, to understand how pupils' participation occurs in multidisciplinary learning modules. [A](#)t the same time, the requirements of the subject-based curriculum must also be met. Thus, successful execution of the multidisciplinary learning modules presupposes promoting participation and creating learning environments where the pupils can make decisions on the content of learning (within the pre-set limits of the curriculum).

This study draws its methodology from practitioner research. In the study we have described an implementation of one multidisciplinary learning module that took place in a Finnish classroom among third graders (9-year-old pupils). In the study we also experimented with a new method for studying pupils' experiences through visual methods. The picture book-interview method used in this study creates a new form of photo-elicitation to engage young people in the research process. In this study, pupils created picture books using iPads. The role of the picture book was to facilitate discussion (see also Clark, 2012; Clark et al. 2013) and then pupils' experiences were captured through interviews.

Our aim in this article is to analyse how and if participation affects pupils' learning experiences. Our research questions are:

1. What constituted positive learning experiences for the pupils in the multidisciplinary learning module?

2. How did the methods used in this study allow the pupils to express negative emotions and participate in developing learning experiences?

In the following paragraphs we describe how participation and multidisciplinary learning modules are defined in the Finnish national core curriculum and define the social and political dimensions of participation. Then we introduce our context, implementation of the multidisciplinary learning module, the data and analysis. We present our results in the same order as the research questions are presented. At the end we summarise our findings and suggest new ideas for future research based on the results and issues and topics raised during the study.

Social and political participation

In Finland, participation of the children and youth has been emphasized in both recent educational legislation and the national core curriculum. It has been noted that the current educational condition in Finland does not support participation strongly enough and that there is a need to reconstruct current educational practices to better consider the imperative to promote participation (cf. [Kiilakoski, 2017](#); [Kiilakoski, Gretscher & Nivala, 2012](#)). However, in the educational discourse the concept of participation in Finland is a late-comer, having gained ground since the ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and the consequent implementation of it in educational policy (Kiilakoski, 2017). For the institutions this has meant that participation is an imperative to change; for the young, participation represents an ideal way set by the adult society of how to be active in society.

Despite the policy significance, the concept of participation has not been clearly defined or even developed theoretically. The vague nature of the concept has been noted repeatedly in studies on participation. It can be seen as an empty signifier or an empty vessel (Theis, 2010) in which different conceptions of democracy, intra-generational relationships and the ideal nature of the community are held.

Based on our earlier work on participation, we understand participation as a relational concept that exists between an individual and a larger social entity, such as a group, class, family or a society. We see participation as a dynamic concept that can be used to describe

the dynamics that exist between an individual and a community. To analyse these dynamics, three perspectives are needed. Firstly, participation involves having a (formally and/or informally) recognized position as an agent. In other words, the community needs to be inclusive and different people should have the potential to act on possibilities that are intersubjectively shared. Secondly, participation should manifest itself in action. Participation involves making an impact on the community, not only in the present but also the future. The second requirement of participation is that the children and youth should be active themselves. Thirdly, participation should produce a feeling of involvement, that is, students should develop a self-image and identity as valuable members of the community and understand their contribution [\(Kiilakoski, Gretschel & Nivala, 2012; cf. Niemi, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2018\).](#)

All these conditions apply to the *political* and *social* dimensions of participation. Political participation means making an impact, influencing the community, taking part in decision-making and taking responsibility. In schools in Finland this dimension usually means working with the school councils and thus mimicking the representative political structures of the adult society. Social participation refers to a sense of community, belonging, membership and positive social interdependence (cf. Kiilakoski, 2017; Kiilakoski, Gretschel, Nivala, 2012; Niia et al., 2015; Thomas, 2007). If participation [concerns](#) political relations, one must have a recognised role as a political agent/citizen to be able to influence decision-making, engage in political discourse and have self-respect as a citizen. If the participation involves social relationships, one [must](#) be a member of the group or the community; one has to be able to act in a group with others and feel accepted as part of the group.

Using the conceptual tools of symbolic interactionism, a social psychological theory which emphasises the role of human communication and meaningful others in the formation of one's identity, the social and political aspects of participation can be analysed together. The basic idea is that self is formed in social interaction. One's sense of the self develops as a response to the reactions, emotions and gestures of others. Inter-subjectivity is a fundamental feature in the development of one's self-respect. Therefore, participating in human activities is needed to develop a positive attitude towards one's self. Hence, an individual is fully capable of respecting him- or herself if and when able to make a positive contribution to community (Honneth, 2005, p. 89). Thus, the personal feeling of having participated and the impact on the community go hand in hand. This positive inter-relation creates an environment

in which the community offers an individual recognition as a competent member and he or she can develop a self-identity as a competent person.

Our conception of participation is influenced by the ‘looking-glass self’ theory developed by Charles Horton Cooley in 1902. Cooley emphasised that the self develops as a response to the social world in which an individual engages. The formative process of communication helps an individual to develop a sense of self-respect or self-loathing, depending on the social interaction and social emotions he or she faces in daily surroundings. According to Cooley, communication is a primary element in most of human activities: “The impulse to communicate is not so much a result of thought as it is an inseparable part of it.” (Cooley, 1902, p. 92). Cooley distinguished three elements of the looking-glass self as: the imagination of one’s appearance to another person, the imagination of others’ judgement and one’s appearance and feelings of self-worth, such as pride or mortification (Cooley, 1902, p. 152). The second aspect that Cooley mentions, especially, emphasises is the role of social emotions. Positive social emotions bring about a positive self-image whereas negative emotions cause one to develop negative feelings toward oneself. Cooley’s theory points to the fundamental aspect of participation: the social emotions one is surrounded with serve as a looking-glass that reflects the kind of person one can be. The theory points out that participation is entwined in daily interaction, all of which constitute a learning environment in which an individual identity is formed. The looking-glass self-perspective fits well with our concept of participation, since it emphasises the role of an active individual and the social surroundings which in some cases help and, in some cases, prevent a person from making an impact and being valued as a person.

In the process of participation, an individual faces a social field where one is recognised and interacts with the social emotions of the field. In the looking-glass self-theory different meaningful groups form a basic environment for participation. In the life span of an individual the same basic dynamics can attach an individual to the society in general. However, the theory sees social participation as a first-order process that offers individuals a looking-glass in which they can see themselves in a positive light and possibly develop a positive self-image. Political participation occurs afterwards in the society at large.

According to looking-glass self-theory, social participation is a pre-requisite for political participation. The theory emphasises the role of communicative contact with the immediate surroundings and primary groups. Through these one develops notions of love, freedom and justice that in turn are used to articulate relations to different social institutions. This also develops a basis for active participation in the democratic process (Schubert, 2005). The application of this theory to the promotion of participation in schools emphasises that it is not enough to provide students with democratic platforms on which they can participate; there must also be multiple ways of supporting social participation first: support for peer group activities, which form a basis for self-respect and active participation in a more political application of participation. According to the three-fold way of defining participation that we have developed this requires looking at the roles a pupil is able to play in the processes, that we are able to identify that something meaningful has happened and that pupils report that they feel that they have actively participated. According to the looking-glass theory, the last part requires that the students have experienced positive emotions during the process.

Methodology

This study is considered practitioner research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2013) that has elements from pedagogical action research ([Niemi, 2018](#)) and design-based research (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 186; Van den Akker et al., 2006). Practitioner research is a methodological approach that focuses on intentionally and systematically studying one's own practice (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 8; see also, Heikkinen, de Jong & Vanderline, 2016). In this study, the first author, who is also the teacher-researcher of this study, worked in her own school community and developed local knowledge through research methods. This study also follows the values presented by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2013) and Niemi (2018) who say that in many versions of the teacher research, the work is done to improve social justice in classrooms, ensure educational opportunity, access and equity for all pupils and improve pupils' agency skills.

The first author of this article was responsible for the data construction and the classroom activities. To produce a more balanced perspective, a researcher triangulation was used to analyse the data. In practice, this meant that two researchers worked together [to analyse](#) the data. In the original phase we both analysed the data individually; [next we discussed](#) how to interpret the data and what theories could be used to [frame](#) these ideas. The initial

categorisation of the data was then analysed more theoretically. Different theoretical perspectives were considered. It could be argued that we used theoretical triangulation as well, since we combined our earlier theoretical perspectives on participation and teaching with the social psychological looking-glass-self theory (Cooley, 1902). Our backgrounds as an educationalist and a youth researcher affected the interpretation. The second author has studied various aspects of participation and participated in different practical policy activities on the theme, including the design of the national core curriculum. Both authors contributed to [the preparation of the](#) final analysis, interpretation and [documentation](#). Therefore, Mitchell's (2002) ideas of doing teacher-research in a collaborative relationship with a teacher-researcher and academic researchers and the consequent triangulation of practical, embodied and theoretical perspectives have been implemented in the study.

In both practitioner and teacher research, ethical considerations must be done carefully; especially when applying visual and narrative methodologies, researchers should be particularly sensitive to ethical concerns (Bold, 2012, p. 50-51; Mannay, 2016, p. 109-111). The ethical standard of responsibility, meaning the special trust that the teacher-researcher must have among children and their parents while investigating issues in the classroom where he or she has the power (Zeni, 2013) was the starting point of our study. The teacher-researcher asked for permission for the pupils to join the study. In the permission sheet she clarified that pupils could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty (see also, Roberts, 2008). She also specified that none of the pictures would be published without asking a separate permission from those pupils and parents, whose child was to be seen in the pictures. The results of this study were also presented to the parents in the parents' evening in August 2018 and the parents have had a chance to comment on the manuscript. Furthermore, the student teachers in the study were permitted to read and accept this manuscript before it was sent to a publisher. By the time they accepted this manuscript they no longer had any obligations towards the teacher-researcher.

Ethical considerations in the practitioner research are questions that relate to one's role in the practices. These questions require that close attention is paid to ensure that the point and purpose of one's role and in the activities are not compromised during the process. (cf. McIntyre, 1984.) In addition, research activities should be separated from other roles so that participants can have informed consent [whether](#) to participate in the research. In this study pupils' right to participate or not participate was carefully [considered](#). Pupils knew that the

pictures the teacher-researcher took during the lessons were part of the research data. The pupils had the right to withdraw from the pictures or ask the teacher-researcher to take a picture from a specific moment (both situations occurred during the lessons). The pupils also had a role in making decisions on the form of the picture-book. They were clearly informed that the lesson during which they made their books was a specific moment for data collection.

Mohr (2001) has noted that teacher-researcher is first a teacher responsible to students, administrators, parents and the community. Therefore, careful attention was paid to ensure that data collection did not cause extra work for the pupils and that it supported the goals set in the curriculum. The basic requirement was that all pupils could have been able to join activities but we used only the data that we had permission to use. In practitioner research it is also important that data collection not require extra expense as the schools provided the equipment used in this study.

In addition to ensuring informed permission for the participants, one of the greatest ethical challenge in this research relates to anonymity. According to Zeni (2013), in action research full anonymity is almost impossible. The data of this study consists of detailed, practical knowledge that only the teacher-researcher has based on having taught the pupils already for three years and by knowing each pupil's strengths and challenges. When having been confronted with the issue of choosing an illuminating example and protecting the anonymity, we have chosen the latter. We have not been able to use all examples we would have liked due to our preference for protecting pupils' anonymity. It is still possible that the pupils who have joined this study can recognise themselves and their peers. That is something to admit, not deny.

The context and the participants of the study

This study took place in the [Viikki Teacher Training](#) School, one of the largest schools in the capital of Finland, between March 2018 and May 2018. In the school, teacher education students engage in their teaching practice throughout semester. During teaching practice, the lecturers of the school work as mentors. In teaching practice, student teachers teach five different subjects and the teacher of the classroom teaches the rest of the subjects. In each teaching practice, the subjects that student teachers teach vary according to the teacher education curriculum. In each teaching practice, student teachers [must](#) implement at least an

8-hour-long multidisciplinary learning module; however, they can also conduct their teaching practice by implementing a 50-lesson-long multidisciplinary learning module.

In total, 23 pupils (11 girls and 12 boys) who were in the third grade (approximately nine years old) participated in the study. In the classroom, all 25 pupils had permission to join the study and they wanted to join the study but, on the day when the picture books were done, two pupils were absent due to illness. There were two female student teachers in the classroom who conducted their 50-lesson-long teaching practice by implementing the multidisciplinary learning module studied in this paper under the guidance of their mentor. This mentor is also the first writer of this paper and in the paper, we call her a teacher-researcher to clarify the roles between her and the student teachers. This study, however, did not [affect](#) student teachers' teaching but they [functioned with](#) full autonomy to plan the multidisciplinary learning module described in this article.

Collecting data from the multidisciplinary learning module

The multidisciplinary learning module of the study was called 'Forests in Finland'. On a subject-based level it related to geography (soils of forests), biology (forest plants and animals), Finnish language (searching for knowledge, writing knowledge and expressing knowledge through multiple ways), art (3D-modelling) and handicraft (sewing a forest animal).

The module was implemented by two student teachers for five weeks. The module began by determining the pupils' pre-existing knowledge about Finnish forests. The next step was to enlarge pupils' content knowledge from forests by getting to know the three main types of Finnish forests: pine forests, spruce forests and leaf woodland. After that, according to the pupils' interests, they were divided into five study groups. In the study groups, the pupils created research questions and each member of the study group chose one question (e.g., what plants, birds or animals live in spruce forests? Are there endangered plants or animals in spruce forests?).

On the third week of the module, the pupils searched for knowledge from their own topic and the study groups created shared conceptual posters from their research findings. When the posters were ready, the pupils chose a volitional way to express their learning through

learning narratives and to teach other pupils through their presentation. Two groups decided to make a scene play, two groups made an iMovie video through pictures and voice and one group produced a puppet show that included an original forest rap song.

On the fifth week the pupils presented their learning narratives to others and received peer evaluations from other groups. In peer evaluation, the pupils paid attention to how the concepts presented in the poster were connected to the presentation. They also gave feedback on the artistic elements (e.g., if a presentation was well-practised, if they were able to hear all the lines).

This multidisciplinary learning module also connected to art. On art lessons the pupils planned and built a landscape related to the forest type they had researched in their study group. In this teaching practice, music and mathematics created a minor multidisciplinary learning module, because in music pupils learned to play the melody of 'Morning Mood' composed by Edvard Grieg. They also studied notes and the notes were (slightly) connected to common fractions in mathematics.

During the module, the teacher-researcher took altogether 80 pictures from different practices. When the module ended, she uploaded the pictures to the school's intranet to which only these pupils had access. Then she and the pupils discussed how to create picture book from the pictures by using iPads and the BookCreator application with which they were already familiar. The pupils had also conducted diamond ranking (e.g., Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2013; Woolner et al., 2010, 2012, 2014) earlier and they were aware of placing pictures in a form of a diamond according to their experiences (see Niemi, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2018) In this study, the teacher-researcher and the pupils discussed the number of pictures they thought they should place to the first spread that describes the most positive experiences of the module, to the second spread that describes medium experiences of the module and to the third spread that describes practices that need improvement. In the pupils' suggestions, the number of pictures varied from one to five. Next, the teacher-researcher suggested that each pupil could choose from one to five pictures to place to each spread of the book.

In Table 1 we have described the progress of the multidisciplinary learning module from week to week.

Table 1. The progress of the multidisciplinary learning module and data collection

After they had chosen pictures and placed them to the picture book, they wrote their thoughts in notes in the book. It took altogether less than 60 minutes for each pupil to complete the picture book exercise.

When the books were ready, the teacher-researcher interviewed each pupil separately. Each interview lasted from five to ten minutes (136 minutes all together). The interviews were not structured but were more like conversations led by the pupils according [to](#) the picture book each pupil had created. In these conversations each pupil told the teacher-researcher about [his/her](#) experiences; they discussed how to act [in the future](#) if the pupil confronts the same situation [he/she](#) had disliked in this module. The meaning of these conversations was not only to collect data but to find ways together with each pupil to participate in improving the learning situations from [his or her](#) point of view. The interviews took place during one school day.

Analysis

At the beginning of the analysis the interviews were transcribed. Then we explored all the picture books and categorized the pictures and experiences related to these pictures into themes and counted the frequencies of themes to get a general view of the data. The pupils had used 68 pictures to describe their positive experiences whilst they had only used 29 pictures to describe their negative experiences. In the second phase, we organised positive experiences into two categories: experiences that related to participation and experiences that related to individual experience and looked at our data deductively by comparing our findings to themes presented in theory.

In the third phase we looked at how the pupils brought up in the interviews their negative experiences. The analysis of these accounts was conducted by first defining the basic logic of each narrative reported in the interviews. The narratives were then categorized according to what they presented: disagreement or rejection among peers, problems in taking responsibility [for](#) one's own work, lack of competence in tasks and frustrations due to a [task that was too](#) easy. We realized that these conversations followed the same pattern. Thus, at the end, a composite story of each type (n=4) was constructed, using parts of several original

narratives. Mishler (1995) has called this method “constructing the told from multiple tellings” (see also, Hänninen, 2000, p. 160).

In the results we present our findings in the order of our research questions. First, we look at how this multidisciplinary learning constituted positive learning experiences. Next, we describe how the method used in this study gave the pupils the means to express negative experiences and participate in developing learning experiences.

Results

Pupils' positive learning experiences

In this multidisciplinary learning module spanning five weeks there were many lessons in which pupils worked and investigated actively in their study groups. The multidisciplinary module also provided pupils with ways to use artistic elements in their learning. In this study, the most appreciated practices related to situations in which pupils had felt a sense of relatedness to other group members and had felt that they were heard and recognised by others. The positive interactions and positive social emotions were mentioned as a pleasurable experience. These remarks emphasised the role of the individual in the peer group and the importance of being able to share feelings and experiences. The pupils expressed these experiences as follows in the interviews:

When we were doing this artwork (landscape), I learned to cooperate with everyone and there were no quarrels.

I liked it, because I was able to work in a new group I hadn't worked in before.

Art added another element to the interaction. Using art, pupils could describe personal emotions and learn about their peers. In many cases artistic elements also brought shared amusement and joy to the pupils' school day (see also, Forslund Frykedal & Samuelsson, 2016). The use of art was mentioned as one way of telling about oneself and learning others' stories. Interaction through art made it possible to adopt different roles and engage in the interaction in a different manner compared to ordinary school activities. Positive social interaction using different art-based methodologies was seen as one of the factors that

contributed to a successful learning experience. It should be noted that this study was not concerned with having pupils be able to decide about the content of their studies but rather about the social process. Furthermore, learning about other pupils' perspectives was seen as a pleasurable experience. This too relates to participation, since the ability to have a sympathetic and imaginative perspective has been claimed to be one of the requirements of caring about others and thus being able to participate in the political process in a democratic society (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 36).

In the interviews the pupils discussed how others relate to them and what kind of responses they gave. To use Cooley's terms, they talked about the meaning of imagination of their appearances to the other pupils and the imagination of their judgement of the appearances. These perspectives relate directly to Cooley's looking-glass self-theory (Cooley 1902, p. 152.) In the interviews the pupils expressed themselves as follows:

I liked to describe myself to others through these pictures. I also liked to hear what other pupils said about themselves.

That picture reminds me of the project in which my friends gave good feedback and then we together explored new ideas.

In some cases, peer dynamics contributed to a pleasurable experience. At the same time experiences of not being heard or not being seen by others in a way a pupil had hoped created the main category of the practices that pupils wanted to improve.

There should have been more pictures, because I didn't get one that represented me. There should have been a choice to tell about yourself without a picture.

Clearly in some cases the way the group decided to work did not allow room for individual fulfilment. Thus, the group did not offer an individual a role to tell about personal affairs and to have a proper place in the group.

I like to act, but in this case my role was to be a tree and just stand there whilst the others had better roles.

This points out that social participation does not occur by itself and the guidance by a teacher is needed to ensure that everyone can participate. The methodologies used in the module left some of the pupils dissatisfied with their role and they felt that their individual ambitions were overlooked. In the interviews, pupils expressed these experiences as follows:

I didn't like to present my own work to others. I wish that we had presented our work as a group and shared responsibility.

I see. But you have let me know that you like to act. How is that different?
In scene plays the whole group is responsible for the presentation and no one's work is highlighted.

The second category of pupils' positive experiences related to the sense of autonomy and potential for free communication. In this multidisciplinary learning module, the pupils were allowed to plan and implement the learning narratives and the artwork. Each pupil could also choose a research question based on personal interests. In the forest trip, the pupils could go freely in the forest and perform given tasks; however, the autonomy was not seen as an isolated individual quality but as an essentially social process: the role of peers in the decision process was important. In the interviews the pupils argued these themes as follows:

I liked the trip to the forest, because we were able to go there with friends and find solutions to tasks freely. We even found a frozen sausage!

Drama is my favourite subject. I like to act and plan our own performances with my friends.

Doing Red Riding Hood was OK. I still prefer creating our own plays, because then we can decide with friends how the play goes.

The third category of pupils' positive experiences related to the sense of competence. The pupils in the study represent learners from both ends of the continuum when it comes to different skills. In the classroom there are several pupils who speak Finnish as their second

language; there are also pupils with special needs in different subjects. Some pupils have special skills that they have developed through their hobbies in subjects related to this multidisciplinary learning module. This multidisciplinary learning module provides pupils with several ways to feel competent in the eyes of meaningful others. In the interviews, the pupils for whom the following tasks were challenging, expressed their experiences as follows:

I liked to search for knowledge and learn new subjects.

Creating a shared poster. The others got to see what I had accomplished.

In this drama exercise I managed to create many different forest voices.

At the beginning we considered these experiences as individual experiences and they did not seem to relate to participation. When we examined these experiences more closely, we realized that the third category, the sense of competence, was emphasised especially among those pupils who often find these situations difficult. Many of these events are related to pupils' ability to function in a group as a competent member. According to our conception of participation, there should be a recognised role as a member of the group and there should be some form of action. Clearly, the ability to act and contribute to a common project created a sense of personal satisfaction.

The main categories of meaningful experience of the project were social interaction, autonomy of peer groups and sense of capability and competence; [all](#) three dimensions relate to social participation. [In](#) our conception, participation requires a recognised and respected role in a group or a community, action and [acknowledgment](#). The pupils did not explicitly [discuss](#) their roles and the emphasis was on doing something meaningful and evocative together. The feeling of cooperation was an important element. According to our interpretation, this implies that the pupils thought that they had a role to play as part of the group. Furthermore, doing something and [receiving](#) feedback from the others was [also](#) an integral element. The ability to decide [to participate](#) was not emphasised nor were the other elements of political participation.

Our interpretation is that the multidisciplinary learning module supported social participation as described in the looking-glass-self theory (Cooley, 1902) by giving these pupils positive emotions of their imagination of their appearances to other pupils, the imagination of other pupils' judgement of their appearances and especially, strengthened those pupils' self-concepts by giving them a sense of pride. [According to our interpretation, being](#) able to contribute to a shared social enterprise and [thus receive](#) recognition (Honneth, 2005) as a valuable member of a community had an impact on the pupils.

We believe that these findings have shown how multidisciplinary learning modules can provide an approach to supporting social participation first, of supporting peer group activities, which form a basis for self-respect and active participation in the more political application of participation. In multidisciplinary learning modules pupils can learn in the processes, that something meaningful happens and that they can feel that they have participated. According to the looking-glass theory, the last part requires experiencing positive social emotions.

[Negative experiences: The workability and effectiveness of participation methods](#)

The multidisciplinary learning module implemented in the study forced the pupils to confront disagreements. The situations in which pupils had confronted disagreement and felt rejection among their peers, created the first category of our analysis. In our data, the pupils who reported these situations as the ones that needed most improvement were the ones who had challenged themselves in situations where they had to negotiate with others. If the process itself was not successful, [pupils experienced](#) negative social emotions on how they saw their role in the group. The next interview illustrates discussions the pupils had with the teacher-researcher in the situation where the interaction [did not work](#). This created a confrontation between an individual and the rest of the group.

The memorizing game was such a hassle. All my cards were not accepted. My friends didn't know the right rules and I had to put my cards away. The teachers should have guided the game better.

What caused this disagreement with the rules?

The others were wrong.

Are you absolutely sure that you knew the right rules?

Yes, because it was an ordinary game, but the others said that it wasn't.

You know what? I also remember, that it wasn't an ordinary game.

—(The pupil *continues to claim* that it was an ordinary game)

You know what? Can you see, that sometimes you find yourself in the middle of quarrels?

(The pupil mumbles and nods his/her head.)

How could you act differently?

Just keep on playing and not pay attention to other things.

Yes. But are there other ways you could act?

I could stay away from quarrels. Or if someone starts to quarrel, I could go away.

Do you remember *that* we have talked about how to interact constructively? If you and your friends find situations in which you have different opinions, you can make suggestions. Instead of insisting who is right or who is wrong, you could start by suggesting a new solution to the issue by saying: "Could we . . .". By being constructive and giving new suggestions for the problems you could reach more agreement.

Social participation requires accepting the norms of interaction within a group. According to Charles Cooley, freedom should not be seen as a negative freedom, where nothing affects the individual. Instead he developed the sociological notion of freedom through which individuals and communities and societies develop together to promote basic values. According to him, "Freedom can be increased only in connection with the increase of sympathy, intelligence and self-control in individuals" (Cooley, 1902, 397). Applied to basic education this means that the promotion of social participation requires constraining the individual tendencies and creating situations in which children can learn how they can act positively in a group.

An individual's development and freedom is tied to the existence of the complex social order (Cooley, 1902, p. 397-399). In the democratic process one must learn how to contribute within this order. It can be said that making initiatives, working accountably and taking responsibility for one's role in a community are basic requirements for active citizenship

(Kumpulainen et al., 2010, p. 57). In literature this political dimension of participation is often connected to pupils' opportunities to work in the school councils and thus [mimic](#) the political structures of the adult society (cf. Kiilakoski, 2017; Kiilakoski, Gretschel, Nivala, 2012; Thomas, 2007) but it can also be captured in classroom practices. In this multidisciplinary learning module pupils had a chance to make initiatives but they also had to work accountably for the study group through their own personal research questions. Before the study group began to plan their narrative, they analysed together whether everyone had searched enough for knowledge. In the interviews there were pupils who talked about the problems they had faced in taking responsibility for their own work and they were often distracted from their work. The next interview extract illustrates discussions the teacher-researcher had with these pupils.

Working with the poster was hard. I would have needed breaks.

What could you do next time in these situations?

Just keep on going.

How about suggesting to the teacher to take a break?

Oh, yeah, I could have done that.

So next time you can say that you need a break. Then you can set a 5-minute timer on your phone, go to the lobby and do something else and then come back to work. I would like to know what you think of your own concentration on this task?

It wasn't the best. I was also clowning around with my friend.

This has been your biggest challenge this year. I know that your friends are extremely important to you. When you are with them, then your own concentration suffers. My suggestion is that you organise your work so that there are clear pauses and clear working moments. When you pause, then you can talk with your friends and when you get back to work, then you can concentrate on work.

In this classroom there are also many pupils who are advanced in many school subjects due to their hobbies or personal interests. The third topic brought up in the interviews by these pupils related to tasks they had felt too easy (mainly in mathematics and in music) or that they had not found meaningful. The next discussion illustrates discussion a teacher-researcher had with these pupils.

We could have gone forward faster when playing [the](#) glockenspiel.

I do understand your opinion, because I know that you are so good at playing instruments. What do you still think? Did everyone learn to play ‘Morning Mood’ even though we went forward quite slowly?

Maybe not.

What do you think? What could you do next time in a situation like this?

I think I could start to work as an assistant teacher.

What a wonderful idea. I highly support you in that idea. Next time when you can play yourself, you can start sharing your skills with other pupils and help me out.

In schools, pupils are typically responsible for their learning to their teacher (Kumpulainen et al., 2010, p.28). Anne Edwards and Carmen D’Arcy (2004) have pointed out that in terms of strengthening pupils’ skills to reciprocal responsibility towards one another they should be guided to share their knowledge and skills, to notice someone’s need for help, to help and to ask for help. However, these are skills that need to be practised and pupils need guidance. As Kumpulainen et al., (2010, p. 28) have stated, [a](#) new kind of teacher-pupil relationships must be created.

Prior learning made some of the tasks in the module too easy for some pupils but as Forslund Frykedal and Samuelsson (2016) had previously noted, the opposite case was also true in our study. The fourth theme raised in the interviews related to pupils’ experiences of finding some tasks too difficult.

It was difficult to search for knowledge of forests from the internet.

I understand that it was difficult. It is also difficult for adults to search for knowledge from the internet. What could you do next time in a situation like this?

I could go to the forest.

How about going to the school library? We have a good library and there are good books that are made for pupils. We can even go there together and find a good book for you. I know that your challenge is in expressing your needs. I encourage you [to](#) express your feelings and needs. It is okay to express your need for help.

In our study negative experiences related to learning how to work in a group and perform the tasks at hand. The points about social interaction show that social participation requires being

able to work in a group and adjust personal behaviour. For some pupils, negative experiences were based on the feeling that they had not found a role in the group. Thus, the first precondition of participation, having a recognised role, was not available for these students. For others, the second precondition, meaningful action, was not possible either. If tasks were too easy or too difficult, the action was not pleasurable. These preconditions created negative feelings. These findings show that the peer group affected ed participation in a significant manner. Furthermore, different roles must be created to support those pupils who find the tasks at hand either too easy or too difficult.

Analysing negative feelings shows that positive social interaction as described by the looking-glass theory requires following the social norms set by the peer group and the school institution. Participation and positive social emotions create positive building blocks of self-identity but they also require conforming to the rules and norms of the peer group, thereby limiting individual tendencies. This behaviour needs to be learned; in fact, it may well be one of the most valuable lessons in education. Therefore, participation should be seen as a learning process, not as something that happens by itself when participation is offered by the teacher.

Points of development also indicate the need to balance different capabilities within the same age group. The previous examples explore typical problems faced in classrooms: the same task is too easy for one pupil and too difficult for another. Instead of supporting segregation by creating ability groups, there is the potential to support relational agency among pupils. In the modules, pupils can assume various roles. At one point they can work as assistants to the teachers and help others; at another moment they might be helped by others.

Conclusion

This paper is based on practitioner research (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 8; see also, Heikkinen, de Jong & Vanderline, 2016) that took place in the Viikki Teacher Training School School between March 2018-May 2018. In this study, we have examined pupils' (3rd graders) experiences of one multidisciplinary learning module by studying 1: What constituted positive learning experiences for the pupils in the multidisciplinary learning module and 2. How did the methods used in this study give the pupils an opportunity to express negative

emotions and participate in developing learning experiences? In this study picture books created a tool to activate pupils' experiences that were then captured in interviews.

The picture book-interview-method used in this study gave the pupils a means to express negative experiences and receive guidance. However, pupils expressed fewer negative experiences than positive ones and only in a few interviews did pupils' experiences relate to student teachers' or the teacher-researchers' work. In teacher research there is always a power relationship that may prevent pupils from expressing some issues that they may consider to be unwelcome truths (Fouché & Chubb, 2017; Niemi, 2018). In this study we tried to reduce the power relationship by collecting data after the teaching practice and the student teachers did not have any power relationship to the pupils [at](#) the time the data was collected. We are still aware that in practitioner research we lose some data because of that. The results in practitioner research are also personalized. Even though our goal was to develop this picture-book interview method as a tool that can be transferred to other contexts, we cannot still guarantee that it works. It demands a state of mind from the teacher to want to engage in a dialogue with pupils, to listen to them and make changes in his or her own role as a teacher.

In this study, the multidisciplinary learning module supported both social and political aspects of participation. Through various kinds of group work, pupils had chances to face a social field where they were recognised and interacted with the social emotions of the field. The pupils' most positive experiences related to the social dimension of participation, to situations in which they had felt the sense of relatedness to each other, free communication and a sense of being competent in the eyes of others. On the other hand, quarrels, difficult or meaningless tasks did not result in a sense of competence which then caused negative emotions in some pupils. These findings support previous research related to pupils' experiences of participation (e.g., [Niemi, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; Niemi, Kumpulainen, Lipponen & Hilppö, 2015](#)). From the perspective of the looking-class self-theory, different meaningful groups that developed during the study tasks formed a basic environment for participation (Cooley, 1902).

The multidisciplinary learning project also supported the political dimension of participation by giving pupils ways to make an impact, influence the study group, participate in decision-making and take responsibility (Thomas, 2007). The pupils' experiences of political participation related to two main aspects: sense of autonomy and taking responsibility. Whilst

sense of autonomy was considered as a positive learning experience among pupils, there was a group of pupils who struggled in taking responsibility of one's own learning and of his/her study group's achievement.

Our results can be briefly summarised by looking at the [various aspects](#) of participation: having a recognised role, engaging in action and feeling a sense of participation. In the interviews the children emphasised the second dimension, on doing something with others. This created positive emotions. However, the fact that most of the pupils felt that they worked as a group means that they were able to experience themselves as members in a group. Most of the factors that created a meaningful learning experience had to do with working in a group, interacting with others and sharing positive social emotions. This points to the perhaps hitherto understated aspect of participation: the ability to make decisions and influence how the group works requires having a positive identity; that in turn requires a social environment based on shared positive social emotions.

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