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ABSTRACT

The Finnish education system is based on equity, and the basic education act emphasises the inclusion and full participation of all pupils in education. Social participation of SEN students is a key issue favouring inclusive schools. Thus, SEN pupils' experiences of social participation indicate how inclusion policies work in practice. This study focuses on the narratives of four SEN pupils concerning their social participation in a mainstream school. According to the results, pupils' perceptions of social participation were strongly related to their experiences in their learning environment. In addition, although their experiences and emotions relating to the school environment were often negative, their personal strengths protected them from total social segregation. The results indicate that in order to create inclusive schools, we should actively improve learning environments to preserve pupils' diversity and to promote the social participation of all pupils. This is a matter of creating more collaborative learning environments, student centred pedagogics and recognising the individual strengths of every child.

Introduction

This is a qualitative study of experiences of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in social participation in Finnish mainstream school settings. In order to achieve thorough understanding of how inclusive education policies affect SEN pupils' everyday lives at school, we need to listen to their experiences of inclusive schools. The empirical data of this article are based upon narratives of pupils with learning and physical disabilities.

Educational inclusion and participation are often seen as human rights issues and as an essential component of social justice. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 1994), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) and the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO 2017) require signatory states to promote full participation in education as a human right of every child. These statements and declarations provide a strong impetus to establish education policies supporting the creation of inclusive schools.

Inclusion is a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation, and achievement of learners (UNESCO 2017). In a broad definition of inclusion concerns all learners, not only disabled ones (Thomas 2013). Consequently,

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Booth et al. (2000) called for a broader restructuring of mainstream school systems to ensure that they are more responsive to pupil diversity by improving social interactive models for teaching and learning. In this study, inclusion is examined through the experiences of SEN pupils' social participation in mainstream classrooms.

Every child in Finland has the right to individual educational support and guidance. Amendments to the National Core Curricula for pre-primary and basic education (CBEA 2010) include a new systematic way of organising support. Support for growth, learning and school attendance is organised according to a three-tiered support model: general support, intensified support and special support. Everyone is entitled to general support, which is a natural part of everyday teaching and the learning process. Intensified and special supports are based on careful assessment and long-term planning in multi-professional teams and on individual learning plans for pupils (Finnish National Board of Education n.d).

In 2016, 16.4% of Finnish comprehensive school pupils received intensified or special support. 37.9% of special support students received teaching entirely in a special education group and 19.7% completely in mainstream groups (Statistics Finland 2016). As these statistics show, a large number of SEN students still study in special education groups. Transition to inclusive settings has hitherto been slow (Jahnukainen 2015; Saloviita 2018), and one reason for this could be the traditional two-tiered education system based on mainstream education and special education (Hakala and Leivo 2015). Although a change in the Basic Education Act (CBEA 2010) was implemented to reform the basic education system to provide support for all pupils in mainstream classrooms, there is still the option that, if needed, the education of SEN pupils can be organised in special education classes or schools.

In inclusive schools, all pupils should have opportunities to participate continually and meaningfully in school activities at all levels. Thus, being physically integrated into a school is not sufficient to ensure full participation. Indicators of the existence of participation provide no information on its extent or quality. In the context of inclusive education, this has been acknowledged as a significant shortcoming (Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Pijl, Frostad, and Flem 2008). Consequently, it is important to record SEN pupils' experiences of participation in mainstream school, because their experiences of social participation eventually tell us how inclusion policies have succeeded in practice.

Participation

The concept of participation is often unclear and multi-dimensional. It has been used as an umbrella term to produce concepts such as social integration, social inclusion and social participation (Koster et al. 2009).

The international Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) identified participation as an ultimate health outcome (WHO 2001). Participation is defined to mean involvement in life situations such as at school, in play/recreation/leisure and in community and civic life. Participation in a variety of activities is important for children's physical and mental health, as well as for their overall development.

According to Booth (2002, 2) participation in education involves going to beyond access. It implies learning and collaboration alongside others, but participation also

involves experiences of being recognised and being accepted. Gretschel (2002, 90), in turn, defined participation as a personal feeling about one's role being significant, and maintained that this can be seen in children''s emotions, knowledge and narratives. Finally, Bates and Davis (2004) saw social inclusion as the right to full and fair access to activities, social roles and relationships alongside non-disabled citizens, whereas Fougeyrollas (2010) emphasised social participation as the result of interaction between the individual and the environment. In this study, social participation was the most suitable concept for highlighting the social aspect of participation (see also Koster et al. 2009).

Researchers disagree about the extent to which SEN pupils actually socially participate in regular schools. Some researchers (Avramidis 2010; Goodwin and Watkinson 2000; Kristen, Patrikson, and Fridlund 2002; Fitzgerald, Jobling, and Kirk 2003) refer to positive experiences when SEN pupils are fully included in lessons and have a sense of belonging in the lesson, and conclude that inclusive schools enhance possibilities for social participation between all pupils (Koster et al. 2009; UNESCO 1994, 2005). Research on typically developing children tells us that a student's sense of belonging in school is merely based on his/ her social relations in this context (Haapasalo, Välimaa, and Kannas 2010; Bossaert et al. 2013). Other researchers point to the risks. For example, SEN students have been found to be less popular than their classmates, to have fewer friends and social interactions with peers and to participate less often as a member of a sub-group (Bossaert et al. 2013; Frostad and Pijl 2007). Furthermore, low social positions have been found to be associated with low self-concepts in students with disabilities (Pijl, Skaalvik, and Skaalvik 2010), and they face restricted participation and autonomy in comparison with their non-disabled peers (Hemmingson and Borell 2002; Pitt and Curtin 2004; Eriksson, Welander, and Granlund 2007; Bossaert et al. 2015).

In order to obtain deeper understanding of social participation, previous research has argued for a stronger focus on children's own experiences and perceptions of participation (McAuley and Rose 2010; Lansdown 2010). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), children''s perspectives offer fresh insights, and children's views are especially important in education, where they are most affected by policy and programme decisions. Children have quite a lot to share about their lives and experiences if they have responsive listeners and co-narrators (Johansson and White 2011).

The Finnish education system is based on the ideas of equity, inclusion, and high-quality education (Finnish National Board of Education 2016). However, hardly any research has been conducted into how SEN pupils feel in mainstream classrooms. This study will fill the gap in the research by illuminating how SEN pupils feel about their social participation in Finnish mainstream classrooms.

Methods

This qualitative study utilises narrative inquiry methodology. SEN pupils' experiences of social participation in mainstream classrooms were studied by using a narrative approach. According to Smith and Sparkes (2008), narratives provide access to the interiority of experience, selves and identities, independently of our theories. They have a real nature, which can be found and known for what they actually are. Narratives describe what has happened, but they also express emotions, thoughts and interpretations (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1995). Shared stories shape, construct, and express individuals' experiences

and reality (Chase 2005). In addition, the narrator's voice draws our attention to what and how the narrator communicates, as well as to the subject's positions or social locations from which he or she speaks (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Thus, as the goal of this study was to gain understanding of SEN pupils' personal experiences in mainstream classrooms, a narrative approach seemed to be appropriate.

However, there are limitations and challenges when applying the narrative approach to study children's experienced social participation. Although narratives may offer researchers vivid glimpses of children's lives, there is a need to avoid overly direct and simplistic interpretations or generalised conclusions (Estola, Farquhar, and Puroila 2014). Narrative researchers treat credibility and believability as something that storytellers accomplish (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). This has been acknowledged by the authors of this study. However, as the study was based on the idea of narrating as a way for human beings to make meaning of themselves and the world (Bruner 1986), narrative inquiry provided a means to gain an authentic in-depth understanding of SEN pupils' experiences of social participation in inclusive settings.

Participants

The participants were four elementary schools SEN pupils with learning and physical disabilities. All four pupils needed special support and studied according to their individualised education plan (IEP). Several criteria were used to select the participants: (i) the pupils had to have an official special education decision, i.e. each pupil needed special support, (ii) they had to be 13–15 years old at the beginning of the study, (iii) they had to study in mainstream classrooms and (iv) they had to have good verbal communication skills. The description of the participating students is as follows:

R1 A 14-year old boy who used a wheelchair in school. He needed partial assistance in transitions and special attention to appropriate lighting in learning situations. He had a special support designation.

R2 A 13-year old boy who needed special support for learning (extra time) and special attention in motoric functions. Part-time special education, support lessons and modified groups in PE were used as a support. He had a special support designation.

H1 A 15-year old boy who used a wheelchair. He needed assistance in transitions and taking out learning materials such as books and a laptop. He had a personal laptop as a learning aid. He had a special support designation.

L1 A 15-year old girl in a wheelchair. She needed assistance in transitions and in taking out learning materials et al. She was primarily educated in special education classes, but she had integrated studies in PE as well as Arts and Crafts. She had a special support designation.

Data collection

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were complemented by field notes. A topic guide was used to provide the structure of the interview, although the children were encouraged to talk freely about anything they considered important (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The pupils were seen as active subjects who knew best how to talk about their own experiences of social participation (O'Reilly, Ronzoni, and Dogra 2013).

Interviews were conducted during the pupils' individual rehabilitation courses in the Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting. Courses were held 1–4 times per term, depending on individual educational and rehabilitation needs. Interviews lasted from 38 to 60 minutes. Participants were interviewed at least twice, and all interviews were video recorded and transcribed verbatim in Finnish. Quotes in this article were translated into English. Data collection with interviews and field notes were conducted between October 2013 and November 2014.

Ethics

Mauthner (1997) pointed out a few important methodological issues when studying children. These issues are consent, access, privacy and confidentiality. Especially a child-centred approach to data collection addresses difficulties between the adult researcher and child participants. Consent for access in this research was requested from the children and from their parents. The study was described briefly to the parents and children, highlighting the fact that participation was entirely voluntary. All participants gave their approval to be included in this study. They were also told that they were co-researchers, because of their important role as narrators of their own life. Best (2007) pointed out that a researcher can become a part of an adolescent's social relations, and needs to move from an authoritative and powerfully imbalanced position to one in which he participates actively in making the research process a creative environment. The interview situations were made as safe and comfortable as possible. Confidentiality and anonymity concerning all information was ensured during all phases of the research.

Data analysis

This study applied categorical-content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998) in order to interpret SEN pupils' experiences of social participation. Categories arose from pupils' narratives depending on their frequency of appearance, or the relevance of the subject matter. The basic unit of the analysis was a single word, a sentence (Miles and Huberman 1994, 11) or an expressive unit such as: description of a meaningful event, a thought, an idea, an emotional experience, etc. (Kyngäs and Vanhanen 1999).

Data analysis started after the interview notes were written. The videotapes of interviews were watched several times and important content relating to this study was transcribed verbatim in Finnish. Transcriptions of interviews were read multiple times and the narrative material was processed analytically by breaking the text into relatively small units of content (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). The purpose of this 'dissection' was to examine the thematic similarities and differences between narratives provided by cases. Key themes were identified and preliminary categorisation was made in each case according to two key themes: (1) positive stories about social participation and (2) negative stories about social participation. The two key themes were analysed again and categorised into meaningful units. Finally, meaningful units were categorised within similar content and they were allocated to three main stories of social participation: (1) environment, (2) emotions and (3) strengths.

Results

Three main stories, (1) environment, (2) emotions and (3) strengths of SEN pupils' social participation emerged from the data. The three main stories included both negative and positive stories about social participation in mainstream class.

Stories related to the school environment

The pupils told many stories about their experienced social participation in relation to their learning environments. Their stories included narrations concerning physical, pedagogical, technical and social learning environments.

Stories related to the physical environment included narratives about accessibility in a school or classes, sitting orders, grouping and the need for individual learning spaces. Accessibility in school activities was considered important, especially if the pupil needed special support or assistance in learning. As Bates and Davis (2004) stated, social inclusion is about ensuring access to an equal range of social roles and activities. If an assistant or teacher providing support was uncertain how to work with an SEN student, this caused the student to feel like an outsider. For example, one pupil (R1) felt frustration and anger when he had to struggle his way to the classroom through stairs with insufficient help.

> Our Physics lessons were held in Music class. If you are a clear-minded adult you know that if there are stairs, a wheelchair won"t go up them if you aren't really an athlete. My schoolmates won't carry the wheelchair upstairs – not one of them. And the teacher is a weak old lady and she couldn"t carry it up. I can get to the classes but my wheelchair can't! (R1)

Even if a pupil had eyeglasses, the teacher did not take account of this sight issue when creating the seating plan. As R2 stated 'I hope I don't have to go back because all tall pupils are in front of me and I can't see the whiteboard'.

Stories related to the pedagogical environment concerned teacher-centred pedagogy, individual learning needs and narratives about pedagogical segregation. Previous research indicates that pedagogy should contribute to pupils' social participation (Christoforos 2012), but in this study traditional teacher-centred pedagogy was experienced by participating pupils to be one of the segregative factors concerning pupils' social participation and interaction. For example, R1 shared how pedagogical practices could prevent cooperation and the possibility for positive social interaction with others.

> We sit in rows, at our own desks, writing things and sometimes we have teamwork … mainly in physics. We have the same partners every time because our teacher is too lazy … . usually we sit in the same places and teacher just sets the teams as this row, this row … (R1)

Sometimes learning difficulties were ignored by the teacher. In these cases, a teacher demanded the same performance from every pupil, although there was an SEN pupil in the class who needed individual guidance and extra support for learning. For example, R2 said that he tried to survive school days as well as he could, but he still ended up with too much homework because he could not do tasks in school in time.

> I wish, when I get so much homework from school, we didn't make it … If there is a new topic in Maths we should go through it. Then If there is some fuzz in the class and we

didn't have time to do tasks, and then I have to do those tasks at home! That's the biggest problem right now. (R2)

Students also reported that homework was sometimes also used as a punishment: 'teacher just looks at the book and then he says: that assigment and that and that … That's not fair' (R1).

All students in this study mentioned that often teachers had no time to take into account their pupils' individual needs. Paju et al. (2016) reported the same results in their study. As R2 shared, 'Sometimes I have tasks, where I would need a lot of help, but my teacher has no time for me'.

Stories relating to the technical environment included stories on the use of ICT in learning, assistive technology and how students use technology in their own lives. Pupils actively use social media in their free time and they were connected with their friends and family. However, according to the results of this study, SEN pupils rarely used ICT in learning at school. For example, R2 stated that his writing with a pen was a mess, and that he wrote slowly. Nonetheless, he was not allowed to use assistive technology in writing. 'No, it has to be written with a pen, but if I had a chance to write it with a computer, it would be much more readable.'

If a pupil had a personal computer as a learning aid, it was permitted for use at school. However, if it was not in a fully usable condition it was easily left out of learning situations. 'I got a (laptop computer) last year, because I have difficulties writing longer stories with a pen. Well, I do not use it anymore because I haven''t updated it; it's in such bad shape' (R1).

Pupils' experiences of social participation are related to their social interaction in their school environment (e.g. Koster et al. 2009). Stories related to the social environment included narratives about social relationships and communication with schoolmates, teachers and assistive personnel. Narratives also included pupils' perceptions of being different and how they felt about it. Social aspects of learning environments were strongly related to the pedagogical aspect. The pupils' stories of social participation showed that pedagogical practices in a class were crucial when building up a socially positive and participative learning environment.

The pupils' stories also indicted that schoolmates might also segregate students with SEN from school activities. As an example, R1 participated in sports play, but his schoolmates did not fully accept him in the game and therefore rejected him from playing with them. Consequently, the student felt himself to be different and isolated from his peers. 'When we play floorball, they don't pass to me, I'm different' (R1).

Negative social relations and communication with the teachers and support staff could also reduce a pupil's sense of participation and sense of belonging (Pesonen 2016). For example, H1 described how he felt about the teacher's writings about him when the student-teacher relationship was not emotionally supportive.

> When he writes statements where he could put positive and negative things, he writes plenty of things on the negative side. There''s only one positive thing, 'a well behaved young man' There were plenty of things I didn't recognise in myself at all.

H1 also described another situation during which an assistant did not trust his abilities. As HI stated, 'when I went to a coding camp in summer, he replied 'you can''t make it there'. He doesn''t believe in my capabilities at all!'

According to the interviewed pupils, they often experienced feelings of loneliness and of being an outsider during school days and lessons, but also particularly during lesson breaks.

> I don't have friends in my class. I have a few friends in the sixth grade. I don''t mind. Usually, we don't do anything in breaks, we just talk together. There's nothing else to do. Most of the time I'm alone, and that's ok. Mostly they play football all the time … I don''t play, I don't like football. (R2)

Sometimes SEN pupils in mainstream classrooms tried to hide their disadvantages in order to avoid bullying. For example, R2 did not want to reveal his disabilities to classmates. This role taking (Snipstad 2019) might have prevented bullying, but at the same time, it segregated him even more from his classmates.

> Well, I tell them nothing. I say to them that I don''t have to do the same things and that's it. Sometimes they rub it in, so I say it's not your business and then they go away. I will not tell anybody in school, none of my classmates know about it. (R2)

According to the results of this study, SEN pupils could have negative perceptions about their social acceptance. This came out in narratives about physical appearance and disabilities. As R1 said: 'I don't get it, why do people look through you and see only a wheelchair? They don't see me.'

Narratives on emotions

According to the accounts of the SEN students, emotions and the feelings of social participation were related to their experiences of the environment. The pupils' stories contained mainly negative narratives related to their feelings on social participation, but there were also some positive ones.

The students' stories revealed that the feeling of acceptance and the sense of belonging were particularly due to warm relationships with teachers and other personnel in school (see also Pesonen 2016). Teachers created a positive atmosphere and feelings of belonging via quality interaction with their students. In addition, the feeling of acceptance was strengthened if a teacher showed his/her interest in the student's thoughts and hobbies and used them to motivate the students in a positive way. As R1 described, 'The English teacher is good. He respects me and we talk about all things in English. For example, we talk a lot about Criminal Minds (the TV-series) and we learn words like "unsub" or "suicide" and other criminal words at the same time'.

The interviewed student stated that there were often situations in a school when they had negative feelings about being an SEN student. This was particularly relevant in situations when interaction with a teacher was negative or the teacher's action was segregative. For example, when a teacher told R1 that he could not participate in games because he was in a wheelchair and could run over others, R1 felt segregated and annoyed. As he put it: 'I was sitting in a corner and watching others play. It was really boring'. Also, L1 shared that: 'I'm not allowed to participate in IEP meetings and its irritating! There''s mum, teacher and … I can''t ever be in.'

According to the pupils, negative social interaction with peers also caused them feelings of unacceptance. This could happen, for example, during a game when other students did not pass the ball to the SEN student. As R1 shared; 'they don''t pass me because I'm different.'

Overall, neglecting SEN students' individual needs caused the most feelings of frustration, anger and unworthiness among the interviewed students. For example, R1 shared that he could not use his computer in school, R2 had the same homework as normally achieving peers, and one student had pain after surgery that was not taken into account during schooldays. Consequently, when the students' individual needs were not recognised, it shaped their perceptions of themselves as students.

> Why did they place me in that class? They knew already that I'm in a wheelchair and I need help … Then I have the feeling that everybody discriminates against me … The principal and others think that it's not a big problem but it is for me. (R1)

Narratives on strengths

The pupils' stories on strengths were related to feelings of empowerment, competence, belonging and motivation. They were all positive stories, and strengths appeared to strengthen pupils' social participation in their schools. Thus, according to the interviewed pupils, their successful participation in mainstream schools was dependent on their personal stamina in the face of adversity. Strengths gave the pupils a solid ground to build up successful schooling and compensated for negative experiences and emotions in mainstream schools. A recent study showed that finding pupils' strengths can promote social participation (Vuorinen 2019).

The pupils' personal strengths were related to their academic achievements or their individual competences. The students' academic strengths were the most easily recognised and valuated in mainstream classroom, as they were visible and a traditional means of showing one's competence in school settings.

Besides academic success, the students' individual strengths such as social skills contributed to feelings of participation among SEN students. Consequently, according to the results of this study, if pupils had enough individual strengths, they were able to survive in inclusive settings regardless of their experiences of social isolation.

As an example, R1 was socially outgoing and academically good in English and sports. In addition, he had a good relationship with his sport and English teachers and had strong inner motivation to complete his schooling despite his adversities. Sports gave him a way of showing his teachers and peers his capability. Over time, during the last school year, his physical appearance had also become more fit and he had a dream that one day 'I'll be in the Para-Olympics and they will be proud of me!' R1 had also posted videos on YouTube. He had received good feedback from viewers and from his peers, especially from his videos. As he stated: 'Many in our school have liked my videos, even girls in my class have.' Overall, competence in academic skills gave H1 the chance to shine in the eyes of teachers and peers. As he was highly competent in ICT, his skills were exploited in the school by both teachers and schoolmates: 'yeah, they all ask me about computers all the time, what to do with this and that. It's ok, it's normal.' This competence gave him opportunities for social participation with peers and teachers and gave him self-confidence and a positive high status among his schoolmates. Consequently, he was motivated to improve his skills further.

L1''s strengths were related to social skills. She was outgoing and also had many friends outside her own class. She connected with friends in many ways. For example, she met friends during breaks and actively used social media. Although she had severe learning

difficulties, her strengths in social life gave her a feeling of acceptance and belonging. Thus, even though she studied some of the school subjects in a special education class she did not face any rejection from her mainstream peers. As L1 stated: 'I have been in student council since 7th grade. My friends are here.'

Sometimes the students' strengths also appeared as skills to cope with the expectations that they thought their peers had concerning social participation. For example, R2 wanted to be like others. He hid his difficulties from others and he thought that the invisibility of his disabilities was a key to social acceptance. Fear of being bullied and excluded was so strong that he did anything to avoid exposing his difficulties: 'I could lie to them a little. I could tell them that I managed to do tasks earlier. Then they believe me that I have already done them, but I have got less tasks to do instead.' He tried to cope with hard work, and did not want any special arrangements that would reveal his learning difficulties. Sometimes studying was exhausting for him, but he was motivated and willing to do his best. In his case, a traditional teacher-centred learning environment gave him a shelter not to interact too closely with his peers and to hide his difficulties from his schoolmates.

All participants had positive expectations about their future studies and how they would get along in life in the near future. They have had negative experiences in their school lives, but still they have strengths and they feel positive attachment to their school and studies. Their strengths protected them sufficiently from the negative experiences of social isolation.

Discussion

This study examined SEN pupils' narratives concerning social participation in mainstream classrooms. According to the findings, SEN pupils' perceptions about social participation were strongly related to their experiences from their learning environment (Figure 1). The findings also confirmed the results of earlier studies (Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Pijl, Frostad, and Flem 2008) that being physically integrated in a school does not ensure full participation.
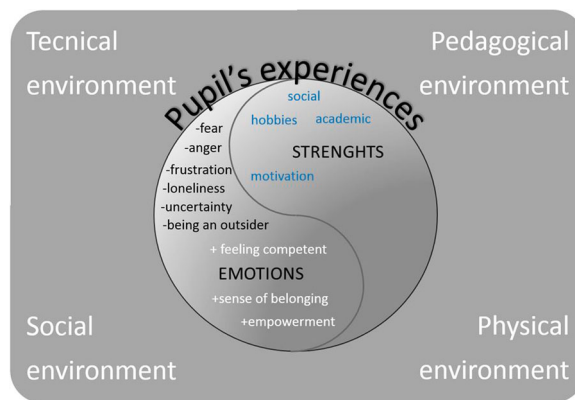

Figure 1. The dynamic interaction between personal strengths, emotions and environment in relation to feelings of social participation in school.

According to previous research, (Bossaert et al. 2013; Koster et al. 2019; Fougeyrollas 2010), pupils' experiences of social participation are related to their social interaction in their school environment. This was also the case in this study. The pupils' experiences of the school environment determined and shaped how they felt about themselves as pupils and as members of a group. In addition, pupils' interaction with the pedagogical, social, technical and physical environment of the school also influenced their feelings of being included and accepted as active participants (see Figure 1). As Gretschel (2002) observed, participation is basically an individual feeling of belonging and empowerment. Booth (2002) also noticed that SEN pupils' social participation in education should be measured through individual experiences.

Participating pupils' experiences and emotions relating to the school environment were often negative (Figure 1). They were less popular, they had fewer friends and they felt fear, anger, frustration, loneliness and restricted participation (see also Bossaert et al. 2013). Nevertheless, all the pupils had personal abilities and competences – strengths (acknowledged or unconscious) which protected them from the experience of total segregation. The findings also indicated and are parallel with Vuorinen (2019) that the pupils' strengths were enhanced by interactions and social participation with peers. Through their strengths (related to hobbies, motivation, academic or social strengths), the pupils got feelings of empowerment, competence and a sense of belonging.

SEN pupils' narratives revealed that their experiences of social participation were not all positive, and that the idea of inclusion as stated in the school act had not significantly changed the pedagogy in schools. The results also indicated that the learning environment had not been modified sufficiently to meet the SEN pupils' needs, and that the pupils felt they got too little support from teachers and assistants. These findings are parallel with those of previous research in Finland by Paju et al. (2016).

The findings reveal interesting aspects of SEN pupils' individual experiences of mainstream schools in Finland. Although the analysis was made on the basis of narratives from only four pupils, Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000) have pointed out that the results can provide grounds for generalisation and understanding.

Finally, it should be noted that supporting SEN pupils' social participation in mainstream schools requires actions both from the school management (Jahnukainen 2015) and from the teachers. Ultimately, inclusion takes place inside classrooms, and teachers hold the key to building up a socially rich and inclusive environment in their classrooms. The results indicate that there is a need for in-service training and efficient cooperation between all teachers. According to Christoforos (2012), teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches employed by teachers are critical in shaping the social status and inclusion of all pupils. Consequently, as Biklen (2000) also stated, the role of the teacher is to understand and recognise diversity, and to understand what approach will help pupils participate in rich and complex ways.

Conclusions

International and national policies contribute to inclusive schools. However, when looked Inclusion through pupils experiences of social participation, schools have to work to do. As earlier studies have shown (Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Pijl, Frostad, and Flem 2008), being physically integrated into a school is not sufficient to ensure full

participation of SEN pupils. Schools should modernise to be more responsive to pupil diversity by improving interactive social models for learning and quality of teaching.

The results of the study indicate how pupils' strengths are crucial for coping with difficulties in mainstream classrooms. Consequently, all pupils' strengths, not only academic ones, should be recognised and valued.

The results of the study also revealed that in order to understand SEN pupils' experiences of their special participation, it is valuable to pay attention to their narratives. The Narration provides researchers with a method to seek and understand pupils' personal experiences of social participation in mainstream classrooms. Knowledge concerning students' feelings and experiences of social participation are essential for understanding the state of the art of inclusion policies in mainstream schools.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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