"Participation is everything"
Till min familj

To my family
"Participation is everything"
Young people's voices on participation in school life
Title: "Participation is everything": Young people's voices on participation in school life.
Publisher: Örebro University 2014
www.oru.se/publikationer-avhandlingar

Print: INEKO, Källered 09/2014

ISSN 1651-145X
Abstract


This thesis shows that participation is an important and comprehensive concept for young people. The aim of the thesis is to explore young people’s perspectives on and experiences of participation in school. Young people are in this research project understood as competent participants and as valuable contributors in research. Young people (aged 13–19 years) are involved as both research partners and research respondents. The design is explorative and mixed methods are used. Study 1 describes an interactive research circle with young people as research partners. Participation and asymmetric responsibility are identified as integral to research with young people. Study 2 describes a youth survey about young people’s participation that was conducted by the research partners in the research circle. This study shows that young people’s opportunities and abilities to communicate are crucial to their participation. Supportive relations are an important aspect and the young people describe that they want adults to support them in taking responsibility themselves. Study 3 is based on the results of the youth survey and describes a model of young people’s perspectives on participation. Viewed from young people’s perspectives, participation is shown to include social, educational and decision-making dimensions. Communication is identified as a central participatory dimension. This study describes how participation in school is created in both horizontal and vertical relations. Study 4 is about participation and exposure to bullying and threats in school and is informed by the results of the youth survey. This study shows how students with disabilities and especially students with multiple disabilities are in a vulnerable situation. They face greater risks of being excluded from participatory dimensions in school or of being more exposed to degrading treatment if they do participate. Girls with multiple disabilities seem to be in an extra vulnerable situation. Overall, this research project shows that young people’s perspectives are an important complement to adults’ perspectives on participation in school.

Keywords: children’s rights, human rights, participation, youth, interactive research, mixed methods, communication, intersectionality, disability

Jeanette Åkerström, School of Law, Psychology and Social work, Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden, jeanette.akerstrom@hotmail.com
Acknowledgements

This thesis originated in two journeys. One was to Pakistan in autumn 2005 and the other was a train trip between Bålsta and Örebro in autumn 2007. The journey to Pakistan was possible due to a very generous invitation from Save the Children Sweden to conduct portions of my master’s research at their local office in Peshawar. The day before my arrival the country was hit by an earthquake that was to develop into one of the worst disasters in Pakistan’s history. During my journey I got to meet people who, despite the disastrous situation, were incredibly generous with their time and their experiences. I also got to see up close how important they considered the work with children’s rights and children’s participation to be in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. During this journey a strong interest in children’s rights and children’s participation was awakened in me.

The second journey involved a chance encounter with a former lecturer of mine on a train between Bålsta and Örebro. During our conversation my eyes were opened to how working toward a PhD could be a way to immerse myself in the topic of children’s rights and participation. I started looking for PhD positions the very same day, as soon as I arrived home. To my former lecturer, Professor Mikael Quennerstedt, thanks for opening my eyes somewhere between Bålsta and Örebro; I owe you one.

This research project has also been a journey. Unlike the trips to Pakistan and Örebro, I was not alone when I began. I have not been alone along the way, nor is this thesis the work of only one woman. There are many people to thank for the completion of this thesis. First of all I want to thank all you young people, both research partners and respondents, who participated in this research project. Without you, there would have been no thesis. Many thanks to Helin, Frida, Frida, Elin, Frida, Hanna, Elin and Mikaela for your efforts as research partners. Thanks for your dedication, your curiosity, and your interest, and for being so generous with your time and knowledge. This thesis is also yours.

Throughout this project I have been surrounded by three very competent and knowledgeable supervisors. My warmest thanks go to Professor Elinor Brunnberg, Associate Professor Osman Aytar and Associate Professor Ann Quennerstedt for always supporting me wholeheartedly and making sure I knew it. Thanks for bringing me back when I was about to get lost, for lifting me up when I fell into doubt (and sometimes despair), and for continuously encouraging me to improve my work. I consider myself
very lucky to have had your expertise and guidance to lean on in this research project. To Associate Professor Yvonne Sjöblom, Associate Professor Åsa Carter and Senior Lecturer Lena Hedin, I am grateful for your critical reading and for your constructive comments during the final phases of this research project. I am also very grateful to my colleagues at Örebro University, in the research group ICU (Interested in Children, Youth and their Understandings) at Mälardalen University and in the Nordic Summer University (NSU) who have read and commented on various parts of this thesis throughout the research project. A big thank you also goes to Everett Thiele for making sensitive revisions in the English language and for greatly improving the readability of this thesis.

I would like to thank the Department of Community Medicine and Public Health, Örebro County, for letting me use the data from Life and Health Young People 2011. To my colleagues at the Child Rights Academy, I express my gratitude for sharing both your knowledge and your work spaces with me. To the organization Reach for Change, thanks for awarding Stenbecks stipendium to this research project.

Among the less voluntary fellow passengers on this journey are my family and friends. Without having requested it, you have all had to live close up with the process of writing this thesis. I am extremely grateful to my dear friends who, especially during the final intensive period, made sure I got food in my stomach and let me come and go as I pleased. You make my life rich in ways that money never can. To Örebro’s best cohabitant and mother in law, Lena, thank you for your encouragement, for providing a home away from home, and for your great wok. To my dearest mother Marianne and father Sven-Erik, thank you for your concern, your help, and for always being there. Your unconditional love is the foundation of my work and existence. To my beautiful daughter Julia, thank you for not caring at all about this research project. Again and again you’ve brought me back to the present moment and shown me what really matters. To my love and life partner Nikola, I cannot describe in words how grateful I am for everything you have done for me and for supporting this project. I don’t know which of us is most relieved now that this thesis is finally finished.

Finally, I would also like express my gratitude to all of you who are not mentioned here, but in different ways have supported this research project.

TACK!

Rydebäck, August 2014

Jeanette
List of publications
This thesis is based on the following publications:

Study 1:

Study 2:

Study 3:
Accepted anthology chapter.

Study 4:
Manuscript submitted.
**List of Abbreviations**

ADD - Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

CRC – Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRPD – Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

IASSW – International Association of Schools of Social Work

IFSW – International Federation of Social Workers

Att vuxna alltid vet de bästa tror jag inte på
nä de borde lyssna oftare på oss som är små

Från låten ’Inte stor nog’, Jason Timbuktu

That grown-ups always knows what’s best I don’t believe at all
they really ought to listen more to those of us who are small

From the song ´Not big enough´, Jason Timbuktu
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION AND AIM ................................................................. 15
Aim and research questions .............................................................. 21
Structure of this thesis ...................................................................... 22

CENTRAL CONCEPTS AND ARENAS ................................................. 23
Children and young people .............................................................. 23
Participation ..................................................................................... 23
Students with disabilities ................................................................. 24
Child perspective, children’s perspectives and child rights perspective .............................................................................................................. 25
Intra- and inter-generational perspectives ........................................ 26
Social work, empowerment and participation .................................... 27
Central tenets in social work ............................................................ 28
Consumers with interests or citizens with rights .............................. 29
Social work and human rights .......................................................... 31
School, a central life domain for children and young people .......... 32

COMPETENT PARTICIPANTS WITH RIGHTS – A PERSPECTIVE
INFORMED BY THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD AND
CHILDREN’S RIGHTS ........................................................................... 35
I Sociology of childhood ................................................................... 35
The structural nature of childhood .................................................... 35
Generation, generational order and standpoints ................................ 37
Intersectionality in childhood studies .............................................. 39
Children as social agents ................................................................. 40
The concept of power ...................................................................... 41
II Children’s rights and the modern human rights system ............. 43
Evolvement of the modern human rights system ............................ 43
The development of various types of rights .................................... 44
Human rights for everyone ............................................................... 45
One Declaration and two Covenants on human rights ................. 46
Children and young people’s rights ............................................... 47
Development of children’s rights – a different trajectory than human rights ................................................................. 48
The Convention on the Rights of the Child ..................................... 50
Do children and young people have a right to participation? ....... 51
III Common grounds and a shared dilemma .................................... 53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and young people’s agency and competence</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An ethics of care in childhood studies – potential problems</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A framework for the research project</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE RESEARCH FIELD</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments for children and young people’s participation</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation for personal and social development</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation for the improvement of services and programmes</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation as a legal and moral right</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation for well-being and health</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in research</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests for more inclusive models and definitions</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in school</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation as influence</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond voice</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation as involvement</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do young people say?</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of this research project</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive research</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research circle as arena for interactive research</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research partners in a research circle</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents in a youth survey</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods and analyses</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods and analysis in the research circle</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods and analysis in the youth survey</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods and analysis of ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency of the project and verification of results</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of various approaches, methods and empirical sources</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability and sampling</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-friendly methods</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of sampling</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical considerations</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction and aim

The year 2014 marks the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (also referred to here as CRC, or the Convention, United Nations, 1989). The Convention has gained worldwide acceptance,¹ which means that a majority of the children and young people of today have lived their whole life as bearers of a complex set of children’s rights. One of the main contributions of the CRC is its promotion of the understanding of children and young people as capable of forming their own opinions about themselves and their lives. This understanding has provided an incentive to involve children and young people in both public and more immediate decision-making processes. It has become common to refer to these practices as children and young people’s right to participation (Council of Europe, 2014; Lansdown, 2010).

Within the European region, children and young people’s participation is increasingly being promoted in European and EU policies (Council of Europe, 2012a; European Commission, 2011). The Treaty of Lisbon (European Union, 2007) makes protection of children’s rights a central objective in internal and external EU affairs, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Commission, 2000) explicitly refers to the right of all children to express their views freely. An increasing number of the newly elected members of the European Parliament are committing themselves to becoming child rights champions and working for the realization of children’s rights in all EU affairs (Child Rights Manifesto, 2014). Participation of children and young people is also increasingly recognized in national legislation across Europe (Lundy, Kilkelly, Byrne & Kang, 2012).

In Sweden, participation and influence are part of the comprehensive goal of the government’s child rights policy that has been approved by the Swedish Riksdag – the Swedish Parliament (Prop. 2012/13:10). In 2009, the Swedish government changed the name of the policy field from child policy to child rights policy. The reason, it was explained, was to emphasize the Swedish state’s commitment to realizing the rights stipulated in the CRC. Since then a number of legal changes have been made in order to strengthen children and young people’s right to have their voices heard.

¹ At the time of this writing, July 2014, South Sudan has most recently become the 194th state to ratify the CRC. The two states that still have not ratified the Convention are Somalia and the United States of America. Both have signed the Convention, declaring that they agree with its core message.
and taken seriously (Prop. 2012/13:10; Social Services Act 2001:453; Educational Act 2010:800). A new bill on support and protection for children and young people (Socialdepartementet, 2009:68) is currently under preparation in Swedish government committees. The proposed law is claimed to increase protection, participation and influence for children and young people in vulnerable situations. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been legally binding in Sweden since 1990 when the Swedish state ratified the Convention. Since Sweden has a dualist legal system, the ratification of the CRC means that national laws are continuously updated to conform to international law. The CRC itself does not apply to Swedish law and is not invoked by Swedish courts. There is however an ongoing government commission about potential consequences of an incorporation of the CRC into Swedish legislation (Socialdepartementet, 2013:35). Such an incorporation would strengthen the status of the CRC in the Swedish judicial system. In an earlier investigation (Socialdepartementet, 1997:116) the text of the Convention was judged as too idealistic and progressive to be useful in Swedish courts. It was also claimed that the protection of children and young people’s rights was more extensive in national legislation than in the CRC (Socialdepartementet, 1997:116). The current commission studying the incorporation of the CRC into Swedish legislation will hand over its final report to the government in 2015.

Social workers are often described as the link between the state or other authorities and the individual. Capacity building and awareness raising among social workers, as well as related professions within child welfare, are pinpointed as key strategies for realizing children and young people’s participation both in Swedish and European policies (Council of Europe, 2012a; Council of Europe, 2012b, Socialdepartementet, 2011). Social work professions thus have strong political and legal mandates to promote children and young people’s participation. Besides these mandates, social workers also have an ethical mandate to uphold human rights and engage people in addressing their well-being and life challenges (IFSW-International Federation of Social Workers, 2013). Participation is described as connected to core social-work values such as empowerment, emancipation, social justice and dignity (Healy, 2008; Ife, 2001; Wronka, 2008). Human rights and children’s rights are claimed to be intimately linked to the ethical foundation of social work (Akademikerförbundet, 2006; IFSW, 2002; IFSW Europe, 2010) and commitment to these rights is described as central to the social work profession (United Nations, 1994:5).
Children’s rights and children and young people’s participation are increasingly used as a frame of reference for the practice of social work (Roose & De Bie, 2008). The issue of participation is however connected to some serious challenges that demand careful consideration by both professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation. Four of these challenges are described below.²

Firstly, many practices of children and young people’s participation are widely criticized for being tokenistic (Fitzpatrick, Hastings & Kintrea, 1998) or for hiding a controlling agenda behind the name of deliberation (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). It is not unusual, under the guise of participation, to invite children and young people to participate solely on adult terms, to expect children and young people to give their opinions on topics outside their experience, and to encourage them to speak their opinions with little opportunity for these opinions to have any substantial influence on the outcome of a decision. Regarding such practices it has to be asked whether children and young people participate at all (Hart, 1992; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010). When children and young people do have the opportunity to voice their opinions these opinions are often judged from understandings of children and young people as being immature and incompetent (Alderson, 2013). Welfare institutions such as social services and schools are criticized for systematically devaluing children’s and young people’s voices in favour of professionals’ and other adults’ views (Barnombudsmannen, 2012; Warming, 2011). Perhaps the lack of genuine opportunities for children and young people to participate is tellingly revealed in the way their participation often seems to be regarded as a technical question, when in fact their participation has the potential to challenge both institutional practices and traditional understandings of what should be considered to be in the best interest of children and young people (cf. Thomas, 2012). Within welfare institutions, adults most often have the prerogative to define the situation that children and young people are required to participate in. Under these circumstances, it can be questioned what genuine possibilities children and young people have to challenge established structures. Another issue is whether it is possible in these situations to overcome power asymmetries between children, young people and

² The following challenges are not an exhaustive list of the concerns related to children’s and young people’s participation. They do however point to some of the challenges that are especially relevant in this thesis.
A second challenge for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation is that there is no strong or unified rights language connected to participation. While some refer to participation as a singular right of children and young people, others refer to a set of rights (the rights to participation) or to a category of rights (Quennerstedt, 2010). The CRC itself is very vague on this topic and the concept of participation seems to have mainly developed outside the language of the Convention (cf. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). There are today a large variety of practice and research activities that go under the name of participation (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010). The word participation is for example used to describe situations where children and young people are informed or where they are involved in making the ‘right decision’. Participation is also used to describe how children and young people have been provided an opportunity to express themselves and their experiences (Warming, 2011). For children and young people to be involved in decision-making processes where they can influence both the process and the outcome of such endeavours is yet another variety of their participation. Moreover, participation can be a one-off event, with children and young people serving as informants about their well-being, or it can be extended in time, as when children and young people are engaged in explorations about what influences their well-being (Thomas, 2007). In the latter case, children and young people’s capacity as ‘knowledge generators’ is often emphasized (Shaw, 2000). A concern is that the concept of participation has become diluted to the point where it can mean almost any process where children and young people are present. That can disguise violations of children’s rights and interests, slow down the development of children and young people’s participation, and seriously diminish the ability of welfare institutions to work for the protection of children and young people in vulnerable situations.

A third challenge for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation is that the rights in the CRC are universal and by necessity very general in scope and application. When these rights are implemented in concrete situations with a specific individual or group of individuals, it is crucial that they be implemented in a contextually conscious way. A thorough understanding of historical, social, and economic conditions, as well as cultural and religious values, is necessary in order not to put children and young people in vulnerable situations.
situations (Boyden, 1990/97; Ravnbol, 2009). It is important to consider how age interacts with for example gender, disability and ethnicity to form a variety of childhood experiences among children and young people (Alanen, 2009; Andresen et al., 2011). The expression ‘children’s right to participation’ is often used as if there was a universal consensus about what this means and as if there was a fixed way to acknowledge children and young people as participants. Instead, the practice of participation needs close attention to how aspects such as individual characteristics, previous experiences, cultural and religious values, power relations, and environmental factors affect how participation can be interpreted and realized in specific everyday life situations of contemporary children and young people. As for now, it is the participation of eloquent, well-behaved, and functionally able children and young people from privileged conditions that tends to be the most recognized and encouraged (Brunnberg & Visser-Schuurman, 2014; Thomas, 2007; Tisdall, 2008). Children and young people who deviate from this norm have fewer opportunities for participation. They might also prefer forms of participation that are not as well recognized by professionals and researchers (Checkoway, 2011). Social workers are in a unique position to promote these children’s and young people’s rights in a conscious way since their professional role prescribes a dual focus: on both the individual and her or his social circumstances (Payne, 2007). This means, however, that the social worker needs to reach beyond thinking of the rights in the CRC as ultimate ends in the development of children and young people’s participation. The CRC was forged in an international political climate twenty-five years ago. Its suitability for young people in their teens has been questioned (Desmet, 2012) as has its application in contemporary society (Quennerstedt, 2013; Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandevelde, 2010). The way CRC frames participation as the right to be heard and taken seriously in adult-steered processes is not necessarily the way children and young people themselves regard their participation (Liebel, 2008). Instead of preaching the articles in the CRC as the gold standard, it has been argued that social workers and researchers should use the Convention as a frame of reference for critical reflections about what children’s and young people’s rights might mean in concrete situations here and now (Reynaert et al., 2010). In these processes, children and young people are themselves crucial partners able to contribute unique insights about what it means to be a child or young person in society today.
A fourth and final challenge for professional and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation is the widespread understanding of protection and participation, care and influence, as potentially conflicting phenomena in child welfare (Kelly, 2001; Kirton, 2009; Walkererdine, 2001; Warming, 2011). Acting in the best interest of children and young people and promoting children and young people’s participation in decision-making that influences their lives are intimately related principles in the CRC (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Yet, adults frequently exclude children and young people from decision-making contexts, arguing that doing so is in the best interest of the child. This is especially common when the child/young person is perceived to be in a vulnerable situation (Brunnberg & Visser-Schuurman, 2014). A fundamental aspect of children and young people’s right to participation is their right to refrain from participation (Eurochild, 2012; Lewis, 2010). However, when adults deny children and young people participation without first consulting them, they deprive children and young people of one of the most fundamental rights of citizens in democratic societies – the right to influence decisions about one’s own life (Warming, 2011). They also prevent children and young people from telling about potentially harmful and abusive situations that they are facing but that might go unnoticed by child protection professionals, researchers, decision makers, and adults in general (Kitzinger, 1990/97).

In summary, this introduction concerns the following areas: an arbitrary concept of participation that risks being too general to be an effective tool for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s rights; the failure to problematize power relations between children, young people and adults in welfare institutions and society in general; the need for welfare professionals and researchers, to include children and young people themselves if child and youth participation is to work to promote children’s rights rather than put children and young people in vulnerable situations; and the view that the protection and the participation of children and young people are opposing goals. Together these challenges form a referential framework for how participation is explored in this research project. A central ambition of this research project has been to give voice to some of the people who are central to, but seldom play a substantial role in discussions about children and young people’s participation: namely the children and young people themselves.

In this research project, school is used as an arena for exploring children and young people’s participation. School is a central meeting place
where children and young people become involved in relationships with peers and adults and where they spend a large part of their childhood and youth. In school, children and young people test and confirm identities, network with peers, learn about themselves and the world, and grow as competent members of society. For children and young people in vulnerable situations, school can be the one place where they are able to find support, confidence, and hope (Hedin, Höjer & Brunnberg, 2011). But school is also a place where adults’ power over children and young people’s time, space and bodies becomes extra salient (Alderson, 1999) and where children and young people are routinely disciplined, measured and assessed according to academic and social yardsticks. Schooling tends to legitimize and reproduce social inequalities, and peer cultures often mimic discriminatory practices in society (Collins, 2009; Lee, 2005; Rosvall, 2012). For some children and young people, school is a place of academic failure, discrimination, violence, abuse, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Considering the fundamental role that experiences in school play for children and young people’s well-being, and how experiences in school tend to follow a person into adulthood (Vinnerljung, Berlin & Hjern, 2010), school is an important arena for social work. It is also a central arena for the realization of children and young people’s rights and participation (Lundy, 2012; Verhellen, 2000).

**Aim and research questions**

The aim of this thesis is to explore young people’s perspectives on and experiences of participation in school. This aim encompasses both a methodological purpose, to design a research process that includes young people in the research process, and a substantial purpose, to find out more about young people’s participation from both intra- and inter-generational perspectives. In order to work with this comprehensive aim, four research questions were chosen to guide the research project. These are discussed and answered in four empirical studies. For each research question listed below, the related studies are indicated within brackets. The research questions are as follows:

1. How can young people be involved in research in order to explore young people’s participation? (Study 1)
2. How can young people apply their perspectives in research settings together with adults? (Study 1; Study 2)
3. What are important aspects of participation in school from intra- and inter-generational perspectives? (Study 2; Study 3)
4. What are the differences in young people’s experiences in school when disability and gender are considered? (Study 4)

The first two research questions are about how to include young people in the research process. These questions are connected to the methodological purpose of this thesis. Research questions three and four are about how young people perceive and experience participation. They are connected to the substantial purpose of this thesis. The first three research questions were formulated in the initial phases of this research project. The fourth was formulated later on as a result of inquiries in Study 2.

**Structure of this thesis**

The introductory chapter describes the background of this research project. It provides a picture of current policy activities in the field of children and young people’s participation and presents four challenges facing professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation. The introductory chapter also presents the aim and research questions of this thesis. The next chapter contextualizes the research project by presenting the central concepts and arenas used in this project. The third chapter presents the theoretical frameworks on children, young people and their participation that are used in this research project. The fourth chapter presents the research field of children and young people’s participation both generally and in school in particular. The fifth chapter is about methodology and describes design and procedure of the research project. It also presents the young people who participate in the project (as research partners and respondents) as well as the methods and analyses that are used. The sixth chapter provides brief summaries of designs, procedures, and results in the four empirical studies. The seventh and last chapter contains a concluding discussion of some of the most important results. It includes suggestions for further research and implications of this research project for social work and school.
Central concepts and arenas

In this chapter concepts and arenas that have a central place in this research project are described. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of these concepts and arenas before going on to describe the research project itself.

Children and young people

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), all persons under the age of 18 are regarded as children and are entitled to protection in the form of children’s rights. Since the adoption of the Convention, a research field called children’s rights research has emerged. Within this field, the term children is often used together with the term young people to indicate that one is referring to both younger and older individuals within the defined age span. In this research project, individuals aged 13–19 years participate both as research partners and as research subjects. Most of them would probably prefer to be called young people rather than children, and some of them have grown out of the CRC definition of a child. Therefore, the term ‘young people’ is used when referring to the aim, research questions and empirical studies in this research project. When referring to international conventions, the research disciplines connected to the CRC, and the research field of children and young people’s participation, the more formal terms child or children are often used in combination with the terms young person or young people.

Participation

In this research project, participation is defined as involvement in a life situation in a free communicative context where one has the possibility to take responsibility and the agency to contribute to the interaction and decision making. This definition is an expansion of the World Health Organization’s (2007) definition of participation as ‘involvement in a life situation’ (p. 9) and is based on how the young people in this research project describe important aspects of participation in school (see Study 2). In English dictionaries (Merriam-Webster; Oxford English Dictionary) there seem to be two main groups of interpretations of the concept of participation. The first group of interpretations describes participation in the sense of merely taking part, being present at an activity or event. The second group describes participation more actively, as being involved in a matter or an event. In Swedish the concepts deltagande and delaktighet are
sometimes used to distinguish between participation as being present (deltagande) and participation as being actively involved in something (delaktighet). Both deltagande and delaktighet seem to be covered by the participation concept (Molin, 2004).

**Students with disabilities**

Inclusion is a national goal in Swedish education³ and the majority of children and young people with disabilities attend compulsory school together with children and young people without disabilities.⁴ There are however two exceptions to the national policy of inclusion. For students with developmental disorders who are not expected to meet the proficiency standards of primary school, special compulsory and upper-secondary schools are an alternative school form. The other exception to the national policy of inclusion comprises the special schools for students with special communicative needs, i.e. children and young people with hearing impairment, deaf-blindness, severe language impairment, or visual impairment in combination with an additional disability.

Since the focus of this research project is to explore young people’s voices on participation in school, it was considered valuable to include students with experiences from various types of school forms in the empirical studies. Children and young people with hearing impairment are described as among the least recognized in studies about children and young people’s participation (Bagga Gupta, 2006). This information, together with the fact that the municipality where this research project is conducted has been commissioned by the government to arrange education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, are two reasons for why measures were made to also include students from special and upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students as participants (research partners and respondents) in this research project. The special measures to include students from both mainstream and special schools as participants are described in the methodology section as well as in the empirical studies.

Disability is understood in this research project according to the definition in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, United Nations, 2006). Article 1 of the CRPD states that the term disabil-

---

³ This is in line with international educational policies about the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education (UNESCO, 1994).
⁴ Sweden is among the EU-counties with the lowest proportion (1.5%) of students enrolled in special education (European Commission, 2012).
ity encompasses those ‘who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (Article 1, United Nations, 2006). Disability is thus understood as resulting from the interaction between the child or young person’s health status and the physical and social environment (World Health Organization, 2007).

The Swedish government has long been reluctant to register disabilities among children and young people. This makes it hard to get an overview of how many children and young people are living with disabilities in Sweden and how their everyday lives are affected by having disabilities. The lack of correct and disaggregated data on children and young people with disabilities has been an area of recurrent criticism in the monitoring of Sweden’s commitment under the CRC (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005; 2009). Sweden has recently begun to build up a monitoring system to make it possible to follow up developments in the living conditions of children and young people with disabilities.

Disability is a complex and evolving phenomenon and there is a wide disparity across studies on how disability is defined and how it is measured (Florian et al., 2006; Riddell, 2012). In this research project, disability is self-reported (van Oorschot, Balvers, Schols & Lodewijks, 2009) by young people participating in two different survey studies. In one of the survey studies, (described in Study 2), the participants answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question on whether they had any disability. Those respondents who answered ‘yes’ were asked to define, in their own words, what kind of disabilities they had. In the other survey study (described in Study 4), the participants answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question on whether they had any of the following disabilities: ‘hearing impairment’, ‘visual impairment not correctable with glasses or lenses’, ‘motor impairment’, ‘reading-and/or writing difficulties’, ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)/Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)’, or ‘other disability’.

Child perspective, children’s perspectives and child rights perspective

Childhood researchers sometimes make a point of distinguishing between having a child perspective and taking children’s perspectives (Halldén, 2009; Nilsson et al., 2013; Qvarsell, 2003). According to Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide (2010) the concepts child perspective and children’s perspectives can be seen as describing different orders when
exploring children’s and young people’s lives. The child perspective then describes the perspective adopted by adults when they try to understand children’s and young people’s perceptions, experiences, and actions. The concept children’s perspectives (or the child’s perspective) is used to describe children’s and young people’s own perceptions, experiences and understandings of their lives and environments. Taking children’s perspectives into account includes letting children and young people speak for themselves. In this research project, child perspectives and children’s perspectives are understood as complementary approaches when exploring children’s and young people’s lives (Nilsson et al., 2013). When adults take a child perspective they have an outside position that enables them to discern structural conditions, shared issues and common patterns that may be more easily detected from a distance. Children’s perspectives give first-hand information about what it means to live in a society as a child or young person, and can provide explanations that are difficult to discern from an adult’s position (Alderson, 2013). In Sweden, where this research was conducted, child perspective and children’s perspectives are quite common concepts in children and youth studies. Related concepts in international studies are for example ‘child voice’ (Eurochild, 2012; Lewis, 2010); ‘child focused’ (Hungerland, Liebel, Milne & Wihstutz, 2007), and ‘child centred’ (Rasmusson, Hyvönen, Nygren & Khoo, 2010).

While child perspective and children’s perspective are ideological concepts, the child rights perspective is a normative concept, tied to political ambitions on how to treat children and young people in society. When the Swedish government changed the name of the policy field from child policy to child rights policy it was explained as a move from a policy that referred to the lives of children and young people in general (i.e. child perspective) to a policy that emerged from an understanding that the Swedish state was obliged to implement children’s rights as enunciated in the CRC (Prop. 2012/13:10). In this research project the child rights perspective is applied to reflect upon the implications for welfare institutions and research of children and young people, irrespective of age, being considered as bearers of a complex set of human rights.

**Intra-and inter-generational perspectives**

In this research project the concepts child and children’s perspectives are combined with a generational perspective where children and young people are understood to belong to a different generation than adults (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2002). This generational distinction is based on the as-
sumption that children and young people, due to their minority status, view the world from a different social position than adults (Mayall, 2002). Although there are multiple positions within childhood and youth (Qvortrup, 2009), children and young people are considered to share overlapping experiences of living within the domain of childhood, which gives them common ground in relation to adults (Jones, 2008). The concepts ‘intra- and inter-generational perspectives’ describe different analytical approaches in this research project. The intra-generational perspective is defined as the assumptions, reflections and interpretations about young people’s experiences and perceptions made by a young person belonging to the same generation. The inter-generational perspective is defined as the assumptions, reflections, and interpretations about young people’s experiences and perceptions made by an adult person, thus representing another generation. In this way, the concepts intra- and inter-generational perspectives in this research project are used as analytical tools in exploring young people’s participation in school as well as the potential of doing research with young people as research partners.

**Social work, empowerment and participation**

Payne (2006) broadly describes social work as being about improving social life and increasing cooperation and solidarity among human beings. The multi-level approach of social work is illustrated in the description of social work as aiming to ‘improve and facilitate the working of society, the environment of relationships and social institutions developed from relationships in which human beings live’ (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009, p. 1). In 2000 the IFSW adopted a definition of social work that was accepted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and published as an international definition of social work (Hare 2004). The international definition has gained broad attention and has become one of the most cited definitions in social work literature (Dominelli, 2009). The text of the definition reads:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IASSW-IFSW, 2000)
Values of social change, problem-solving, empowerment, and liberation stand out as core mandates in the international definition. Social change and problem solving refer to the roots of social work in the Settlement House movement and the social casework tradition. Empowerment and liberation are more recent arrivals to the social work tradition and are influenced by the works of Paulo Freire and the emancipatory potential of promoting people’s capacities for critical reflection over their lives, societies, and environments (Hare, 2004, see also Freire, 1970). More than a decade has passed since the international definition was adopted, and in 2013 the IFSW and IASSW published a blueprint for a ‘global definition of social work’ to be presented at the General Meeting in Melbourne in 2014⁵ (IFSW, 2013). Like the international definition, the blueprint for the global definition emphasizes the advocating and upholding of human rights as well as social justice as the motivation and justification for social work. But there is also the additional statement that “individual human rights can only be realized on a day-to-day basis if people take responsibility for each other and the environment”. One possible implication of this addition is discussed in the section about social work and human rights later on in this chapter.

**Central tenets in social work**

Although empowerment is a relatively new concept in social work, it has rapidly become one of its most central tenets (Adams et al., 2009; Bülow, Persson, Thunqvist & Sandén, 2012). Empowerment is used both to describe processes where people become ‘empowered’ and to refer to methods that social workers use to work with people in ways that promote and enhance their power (Adams, 2008; Lee & Hudson, 2011; Pierson & Thomas, 2010). Working with empowerment is described as including such things as capacity building, equipping people with self-esteem resources, and raising people’s confidence in sharing knowledge and skills (Braye, 2000). A number of definitions of empowerment are in use; in one of them, Adams (2003) describes empowerment as:

> the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby be-

---

⁵ The ISFW General meeting took place on 6 and 7 July 2014. At the time of this writing, July 2014, no further information about the proposed global definition has been published.
Empowerment is closely linked with the concept of participation, and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Bray, 2000; Bülow et al., 2012). During the last decades, a broad practice of participation has developed within the social work profession; from increased involvement of the individual in her use of services to the involvement of individuals or user-led organizations in the planning and provision of welfare services (Beresford, 2005; Bray, 2000; Socialstyrelsen, 2003). User participation has become a topic of research, with users sometimes conducting research on their own. Empowerment and participation have spurred changes in social work, going from working on behalf of people to working with people.

Consumers with interests or citizens with rights

Both empowerment and participation have their roots in consumerism and the democratic movement;\(^6\) two trends that in recent decades have had a major impact on the welfare sector, at least in Western societies (Hultqvist & Salonen, 2011; Shaw, 2000). At a very general level, consumerism reflects an idea about consumption where the free choice of the consumer should orient itself around what is produced in an unregulated and competitive market. During the 1980s and 1990s the idea of consumerism migrated from the business to the welfare sector, in particular to social work. Managerial ideas about marketization and efficiency were implemented in the delivery of welfare services (Alderson, 2010). With the introduction of market principles there also followed a greater emphasis on the involvement of users in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services.

In a consumerist perspective the users of welfare services have increasingly been redefined as customers or co-producers of welfare (Langegaard, 2014). User involvement is argued to make the public sector more efficient, effective and responsive to service users’ wishes and needs. The consumerist approach has been described as defining the individual in more

\(^6\)At a societal level as well the trend of governance as a way to move towards more decentralized and less hierarchical forms of decision-making in state affairs has spurred an increased interest in participation, at least in Western societies (Tisdall, 2008).
empowering ways, as it emphasizes her or his role as an active consumer rather than a passive receiver of welfare. The market-oriented welfare approach has however been criticized for neglecting the important differences between being a consumer of goods and being a consumer of welfare. The most fundamental power of the customer, not to consume, is seldom an alternative for the user of welfare services. The power relations between users and providers of welfare services are also likely to be asymmetric to much greater extent that those between consumers and providers of goods. Moreover, those critical of the consumerist approach argue that the freedom of choice and available forms of user involvement are often restricted by rigid organizational and budgetary limitations. The freedom of choice is also restricted by other market forces that are more dominant than users’ desires and needs (Adams, 2003). One concern regarding the consumerist approach is that it has changed the understanding of individuals from citizens with rights to consumers with interests (Langegaard, 2014).

A parallel trend that has affected the welfare sector in the last decades is the democracy movement with increased demands for democratic control over welfare services by the individuals who use them. This demand has particularly been made by minority groups in society. An important claim of the democracy movement is that the individual should be understood in terms of her whole life situation and as a full-fledged human rights bearer rather than being reduced to her interests in the delivery of welfare services (Dominelli, 2009). People in vulnerable groups, it is argued, are experts on their own situations and have the right to participate in issues that concern the welfare services that are distributed to them.

Although they use the same terminology, the consumerism and democracy movements give different meanings to the concepts of participation and empowerment (Nolas, 2011). In the consumerist movement, empowerment and participation are top-down activities initiated by authorities and directed towards individuals. In the democratic movement, empowerment and participation are bottom-up demands for the collective rights of individuals belonging to vulnerable and minority groups in society. Whereas in the consumerist perspective, empowerment and participation are considered as means to improve welfare distribution and uptake, in the democratic perspective empowerment and participation are promoted as ways to realize social justice and human rights for people in vulnerable situations (Adams, 2003). A concern regarding top-down initiated participation and empowerment is that it can become a way of controlling users
and keeping them docile rather than a way to respect the integrity of individuals and work to enhance liberation of their potentials (Gallagher, 2008a). This criticism is especially salient for the social work profession, which also often operates in accordance with a protective and corrective agenda (Alderson, 2010; Bülow et al., 2012). From a democratic perspective, the term user involvement is sometimes considered to be tainted by the consumerist approach. Instead the term participation tends to be preferred to indicate a more democratic and rights-based agenda (Shaw, 2000).

Social work and human rights
Promoting and realizing human rights is described as a central task of the social work profession (IFSW, 2002; IFSWE, 2010). It is considered as a natural part of the profession’s ambition to improve the welfare of people in vulnerable situations (United Nations, 1994:5), alongside the core social work values of humanity, democracy, equality, and sustainability (IFSWE, 2010). One year before the CRC was adopted, IFSW declared that social work had always been a human rights profession (IFSW, 1988, see also Ife, 2001; Reichert, 2003; Wronka, 2008). This statement might seem a bit odd considering that the social work profession was established well before any universal claims of human rights were proposed, or at least before any such claims had gained widespread attention in the international community.

The current promotion of universal human rights standards in social work (Hare, 2004; IFSW, 2002) has been opposed by other scholars who argue that social work is situated in mutual needs in relationships and families, and thus is governed by the local rather than the universal (Clifford, 2002; Orme, 2002; Parton, 2003). Based on these arguments, it is suggested that an ethics of care would provide a better basis for social work than an ethics of rights and justice. Since the ethics of care is described as becoming increasingly popular among scholars in social work (Banks, 2008) there could be a potential conflict of interests between the rights and care perspectives within the social work discipline. Because both perspectives seem to provide social work with valuable insights, perhaps a more fruitful approach would be, as some scholars propose, to view the rights and care approaches as complementary rather than opposing perspectives in social work (cf. Bichenbach, 2009). Meagher and Parton (2004), for example, argue that the ethics of care are dependent on human rights since caring relations only really work if rights are fully real-
ized. Studying children and young people with intellectual disabilities, McKenzie and Macleod (2012) suggest that caring relationships should be understood as a consequence of the right to full participation for people with disabilities. According to Petshesky (2000, see also Skegg, 2005) rights and needs are the same thing, but rights are to be preferred since they imply that those in power have a duty to provide whatever requisites are necessary to make sure those needs are met. An interesting development in the discussion of ethics of care and ethics of justice in social work is the suggested global definition of social work (IFSW, 2013, see previous section). The increased focus on relations and human interrelatedness in the global definition seems to indicate an ambition to emphasize the importance of mutual needs and reciprocal relationships for human well-being. A revised definition of social work might thus be a step closer to achieving reconciliation between rights and needs – an ethics of justice and an ethics of care – in social work.

School, a central life domain for children and young people
School and education are issues that children and young people tend to care especially much about (Checkoway, 2011) and no doubt school is one of the most central arenas in children’s and young people’s lives. No other social institutions have such broad, frequent and intense contact with children and young people as educational institutions. Both national and international studies describe education and school as the most influential protective and promoting factors for children and young people in general and for children and young people in vulnerable situations in particular7 (Andersen, 2008; Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011; Hjörne, 2004; Jackson 2001; Utbildningsdepartementet, 2010:95). A good education has been described as a way out of social disadvantage (Vinnerljung et al., 2010), and peer relations in school play a significant role for children and young people in vulnerable situations (Hedin et al., 2011; Murberg & Bru, 2008). In the Swedish government’s action plan to realize children and young people’s rights and participation, school appears as a central arena (Socialdepartementet, 2012). There are however three circumstances that make school into a rather special arena for children and young people’s participation.

7 Högdin (2007) describe research about children and young people’s educational situation as a growing area in social work research.
The first is that education, at least in many Western societies, is compulsory. Children and young people often have no other choice than to attend school, which undoubtedly provides a specific context for participation within educational institutions. According to the CRC, education is the right of every child and young person (Article 28, United Nations, 1989). For motivated, academically driven students who easily adapt to the structures at school, compulsory schooling might very well be seen as a right and a privilege. But for other students, who do not receive appropriate support and education in school, who are exposed to violence and harassment, and who not perceive school as meaningful, compulsory schooling might be nothing more than a burden and an obligation (Persson, 1994).

The second circumstance that makes school a special arena for children and young people’s participation is that a central task of schools is to educate children and young people according to specific ideals of citizenship in particular states. In the Nordic countries, for example, these ideals have undergone a shift during the last couple of decades from forming children and young people into an athletic and healthy future work and war force to educating children and young people to be reflective, flexible, and responsible citizens of democratic societies (Assarson, Ahlberg, Andreasson & Ohlsson, 2011). The fact that school often has been used as arena to control, shape and polish children’s and young people’s behaviours according to states’ interests has made childhood researchers claim that school is the arena where adults’ domination over children and young people has the largest impact on children’s everyday lives (Alderson, 1999; Andresen et al., 2011).

The third circumstance that makes school a special arena for children and young people’s participation is that school has come to dominate the childhood of many contemporary children and young people. Children and young people spend many hours a week in school and are often also expected to devote some of their spare time to school-related tasks such as homework and preparing for various tests. Having their capacities tested and examined in various ways is part of children and young people’s everyday life. Some childhood researchers refer to ‘scholarization’ as a central element of modern western childhood (Andresen et al., 2011; Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 1985). These researchers claim that two of the consequences of the expanded role of school in modern childhood are that children and young people’s activities have become increasingly separated
from adults’ activities and that their contributions to society have largely been hidden within educational institutions (Qvortrup, 1985).
Competent participants with rights – A perspective informed by the sociology of childhood and children’s rights

In this chapter the central theoretical frameworks on children, young people and their participation that are used in this research project are described. This chapter is divided into three sections. Section I introduces characteristic features of the sociology of childhood, Section II focuses on children’s rights and how the idea of children and young people’s participation has evolved within the human rights framework. Section III describes common ground and a shared dilemma of the sociology of childhood and the children’s rights framework.

I Sociology of childhood

The sociology of childhood is described as having been established as an academic subject during the 1980s and 1990s within the field of sociology (Kampmann, 2003). Proponents of the sociology of childhood generally claim to have made two distinct theoretical contributions to the field of childhood studies. One is the idea of the structural nature of childhood (Alanen, 1988; 1992; Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Qvortrup, 1985; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta & Wintersberger, 1994). The other is the idea of children as social agents (Alderson, 1993; Corsaro, 1997; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1990/97; Mayall; 2002; Prout, 2002). These theoretical contributions have increasingly been adopted and further developed by scholars and researchers from a range of disciplines including social work (Alanen, 2014; Bühler-Niederberger, 2010).

The structural nature of childhood

According to the idea that childhood has a structural nature, childhood is a permanent element of social structure (Qvortrup, 2009). As such, it is assumed to interact with political, economic, cultural, and ideological parameters to form specific childhoods in specific contexts. The way these parameters interact is expected to influence both the position that children, young people and childhood have in a society and how childhood is lived by those currently inhabiting it. Because the political, economic, cultural, and ideological parameters change over time, the childhoods that were lived by children and young people in for example the 1950s are not regarded to be the same as the childhoods that are lived by children and
young people in the 2010s or the childhoods that will be lived by children and young people in the 2050s.

Adherents of the sociology of childhood seem to refer to multiple childhoods to emphasize the constructed elements of childhood and the plurality of experiences among children and young people. By using the term ‘childhoods’ rather than ‘childhood’, sociologist of childhood also distance themselves from theories about childhood as a natural and universally applicable concept (James, 2009; Prout & James, 1990/97). To be in a state of intense growth is considered to be a universal phase of human life, but the specific content of childhood at any given time and place are, in the sociology of childhood, understood to be socially constructed. The very strong emphasis sometimes placed on the constructed nature of childhood in the sociology of childhood has however been criticized for neglecting historical and biological constraints on children, young people and childhoods (Alderson, 2013; Lee, 2005).

Comparisons of children’s and young people’s living conditions over time and space have been a recurrent topic within the sociology of childhood. One of the most frequently cited publications on this theme is the report Childhood Matters authored by Qvortrup et al. (1994). Childhood Matters was the final report from the study ‘Childhood as a Social Phenomenon’ (1987–1992) that aimed to explore and compare the diverse social effects and socioeconomic circumstances of children and young people across Europe. Proponents of the sociology of childhood often praise this study for its groundbreaking work in making the life conditions of children and young people accessible for large-scale analysis. Two of the most influential conclusions from Childhood Matters seem to have

---

8 A criticism against development psychology often expressed by proponents of the sociology of childhood concerns its claim to have universally applicable theories despite these theories having been developed mainly in connection with Western contexts and childhoods. Although the sociology of childhood argues for contextual awareness (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010), it is noteworthy that many of the seminal works of the discipline (e.g. James & Prout, 1990/97; Jenks, 1982; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Thorne, 1987) are authored by scholars from the USA and northern/western Europe.

9 In ‘Childhood as a Social Phenomenon’ researchers worked to make it possible to compare life conditions of children and young people in different societies as well as to compare children’s and young people’s life conditions with the life conditions of other segments of society. This was in stark contrast to how children and young people at that time usually were included in family statistics and treated as appendages to families rather than as independent units of analysis.
been that different socioeconomic circumstances create different kinds of childhoods within Europe, and that potential differences between children’s and young people’s life conditions and well-being in relation to adults make it meaningful to recognize children and young people as a social group. While the first conclusion support the understanding of multiple co-existing childhoods described above, the second conclusion led to theorizations of generations and a generational order as concepts relevant for childhood studies in the same way as the concepts of gender and gender order have been described as relevant for gender studies (Alanen, 2009).

Generation, generational order and standpoints
Within the sociology of childhood, the concept of generation has little to do with chronological age, age span studies, or a certain state in life. Instead it is used to refer to childhood and adulthood, children and adults, as interrelated social categories in a generational structure or a generational order (Alanen, 2009; Honig, 2009).

One of the main theorists of the concept of generation in the sociology of childhood is childhood researcher Leena Alanen (1988; 1992; 1994; 2001). According to Alanen (2009), children (here also understood as including young people) and adults are social categories that are reciprocally related to each other. Children are socially positioned as children because of how they are assumed to differ from members of the category adults, and adults are socially positioned as adults by how they are assumed to differ from members of the category children. Children and adults are hence conceptualized by their differences; without adults there would be no point in referring to children and young people, and without children it would be impossible to relate to the concept of adults. The categories of children and adults are produced, reproduced and confirmed by social relations and everyday interactions between the members of each category. In these interactions, children and adults position themselves and each other according to a ‘generational order’. Compared to adults’ positions in the generational order, children’s positions are usually closer to protection and nurturing, but further away from agency and participation (Alanen, 1992; 2009; Mayall, 2000).

According to childhood researcher Berry Mayall (2002), children and young people have a minority position in society, from which their perspectives, voices and knowledge tend to be subordinated to those of adults. As a result of their minority position, children’s and young people’s
voices and perspectives are largely unrepresented (or severely underrepresented) in decision-making that has an impact on their lives. One of the consequences of the general exclusion of children and young people from such decision making is that they are expected to conform and live their childhood and youth according to norms and standards set solely from the perspectives of adults. From a generational perspective this is problematic, because children and young people are the only ones with first-hand knowledge about what it is like to be a child or young person in the specific society at the specific time in which they are positioned as a child or young person.

Both Alanen and Mayall draw much inspiration from the way researchers in gender studies have analysed the position of women and men in society. Inspired by feminist standpoint theory, Mayall (2002; see also Brunnberg, 2013) argues in favour of the development of a children’s standpoint. The argument is based on how children, due to their minority position, are assumed to form different perspectives on the world than those that adults form from their majority position in society. Perspective is understood in standpoint theory as a way to look at the world from a social position that conditions, but does not determine how the individual understands what she sees (Young, 2000). This means that children and young people are understood to share a certain perspective by virtue of being members of the same social group. Within this group however there will be internal variances in individual members’ opinions, values, and ideas.

There may however be some limitations connected to using gender theories as role models for inquiries in childhood studies (see e.g. Honig, 2009). An important difference between gender studies and childhood studies lies in the characteristics of their study objects. In theories about the gender order, membership in the categories of female and male is generally considered to be relatively stable, and members of the different categories are not assumed to become more alike the older they grow. In the generational order, membership in the category of children is considered to be temporary, with members being expected to successively acquire characteristics that make them more similar to the members of the category of adults. This move towards an expected membership transition also

---

10 In feminist research, standpoint theory has been developed to describe how the inclusion of minority perspectives can provide richer and more complex understandings of society (Harding, 1986; 1991).
plays a vital role in the way children and young people understand themselves, their childhood and youth, and their future selves (Uprichard, 2008). Thus, time adds a scale of gradations to the generational order to which there seems to be no equivalent in the gender order. The fact that time also can be a significant organizational principle within the category of children and young people – such that those who have been members for a longer time tend to have a more influential position than more recently arrived members – is an issue that largely seems to have been overlooked in childhood studies. An important challenge for contemporary sociologists of childhood is to work with concepts and theories that acknowledge differences between children and young people’s living conditions in comparison with adults’ living conditions, while at the same time offering ways to overcome the inevitable loss of differentiation when individuals are treated collectively as a social group (Andresen et al., 2011; Bühler-Niederberger, 2010; Honig, 2009).

Intersectionality in childhood studies
One way to account for a shared position in the generational order and, at the same time, acknowledge some individual differences is to apply an intersectional perspective to children and young people’s life conditions (Alanen, 2009; Aytar & Mella, 2012; Brunnberg, Lindén-Boström & Persson, 2009). The intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989; 1993) was originally developed within gender studies to recognize how women’s lives were influenced by the fact that they, besides being women, simultaneously were assigned a variety of social belongings along asymmetric power axes (e.g. working class/middle class, heterosexual/homosexual, and immigrant/native). The intersectional perspective is described as a way to illustrate how social identities are formed in an interplay between multiple belongings (Crenshaw, 1993, Mattsson, 2010). In childhood studies, the intersectional perspective makes it possible to explore how children’s and young people’s lives are structured not only by their position in relation to adults, but also by parameters such as gender, disability, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Alanen, 2009).

The intersectional perspective allows for understanding the multiple ways that childhood and youth can interact with other variables to form multiple childhoods and youths (Kofoed, 2008). It has been described as providing the necessary awareness in child protection work to prevent reinforcing or reproducing exclusion and discrimination of children and young people at risk of being multiply disadvantaged (Ravnbol, 2009).
this research project, the intersectional perspective is employed to explore how disability and gender interact to form diverse experiences of participation in school among girls and boys with and without disabilities.

**Children as social agents**

The second central theoretical contribution to childhood studies claimed by proponents of sociology of childhood is the understanding of children and young people as social agents. A social agent is described as someone whose actions have a bearing not only on her own life but also on the lives of others (Mayall, 2002). As social agents, children and young people are understood to have their own ideas, wishes, and ways of experiencing themselves and others. They are also understood to contribute to intergenerational relations, culture and social structures (Corsaro, 2011; James, 2009). Researchers employing the perspective of the sociology of childhood have described children’s and young people’s contributions to family life, both in everyday ‘doing family’ (Solberg, 1990/97) as well as during crises such as separations (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001) and out-of-home care (Hedin, 2012). By adding children’s agency to socialization theory, Corsaro (1997; 2011) has described how children are vital contributors to cultural and social reproduction and change. The capacity to act as a social agent has also been described for very young children (Alderson, 1993; 2000).

Related to the understanding of children and young people as social agents is the idea that children, young people and childhoods are ‘worthy of study in their own right’ (Prout & James, 1990/97, p. 8). This statement means that children’s and young people’s lives and living conditions are considered to be interesting, not primarily because they may deviate from some notion of normality or because of their assumed significance in an expected adulthood, but because of their own worth. Whether children’s and young people’s subjective life worlds are similar to or different from adults’ life worlds is for example considered to be an empirical question well worth exploring in the sociology of childhood.

The importance of studying childhood ‘here and now’, with a focus on children’s and young people’s contributions in everyday interactions is a frequently repeated mantra in childhood studies inspired by the sociology of childhood. One possible reason for this preoccupation with the present might be a desire, at least among early proponents, to distinguish understandings of children and young people within the sociology of childhood from understandings in traditional developmental perspectives and sociali-
zation theories (Kampmann, 2003; James & Prout, 1990/97). Proponents of the sociology of childhood tend to be critical of how (in their view) traditional socialization theories portray children and young people as ‘cultural dopes’ and in the process of becoming social creatures rather than as being socially competent from the day they are born (Corsaro, 2011; James et al., 1998). Likewise, proponents of the sociology of childhood often strongly criticize traditional developmental perspectives for ignoring children and young people’s agency and instead regarding them solely as products of heredity and environment; for overlooking their capacities by judging them by their deficits as not yet adults; and for viewing them as ‘becomings’ rather than ‘beings’ (James & Prout, 1990/97; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014; Qvortrup, 1994). In later years, this critique has become more nuanced. Lev Vygotsky’s (1896–1934) ‘theory of social development’ for example is often referred to as an early theory of children and young people’s capacity to interact with and contribute to their own development (Corsaro, 1997; 2011; Honig, 2009; Sommer et al., 2010; Walkerdine, 2008; Woodhead, 1999; 2009)

The strong being-becoming divide that has tended to be promoted in the sociology of childhood is however contested by contemporary scholars in childhood studies. Lee (2005), for example, argues that both children and adults are in constant processes of being and becoming, and that both perspectives are salient in human nature. Uprichard (2008) suggests that a ‘being and becoming’ perspective would be more beneficial for understanding children and young people’s agency, as it also acknowledges the way growing up is a central feature of children’s and young people’s lives. The strong focus on children and young people’s agency in the sociology of childhood is also criticized for ignoring how background variables like class, culture and earlier experience provide an important backdrop for children and young people’s ability to enact their agency (Bühler & von Krieken, 2008). Expecting all children and young people to be able and willing to exercise agency without providing any means for them to do so is criticized because it risks excluding and discriminating those who are already in vulnerable situations (James, 2009; Prout, 2000; Wyness, 2006).

The concept of power
Adults’ power over children and young people’s participation is a central theme in the sociology of childhood, and a common standpoint in childhood studies is that all practical uses of participation involve power of
some sort (Cattrijsse & Delens-Ravier, 2006). In traditional models of children and young people’s participation (see e.g. Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) participation is commonly described as depending on how much power adults are prepared to give to children and young people. Others however oppose this understanding of power as a commodity that adults can share, give away, or lose to children and young people.

A Foucauldian perspective has been used to approach the matter of power differently in childhood studies about participation (Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith & Taylor, 2010; Malone & Hartung, 2010; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). From a Foucauldian perspective, power becomes something that surrounds and permeates participatory settings between children/young people and adults (Foucault 1982). From such a perspective, the idea that adults can empower children and young people through participation is problematic, since it seems to suggest that power is something that adults possess and can give away. Indeed, Shier et al. (2014, see also Jones, 2008) are sceptical of the claim that anyone can empower anyone else, since empowerment is dependent on active participation and commitment from individuals themselves. Such engagement among children and young people tends however to require committed adults who are keen to exercise power in liberating rather than manipulative ways.

By using Foucault Gallagher (2008a) describes how in participatory processes with children and young people power exists more as a potential than as a commodity. Power can be exercised by adults to create opportunities for empowerment, liberation and resistance among children and young people.11 Power can also be exercised by adults to control, subordinate and create compliance among children and young people12 (see also Johansson 2011; Shier, 2010; Warming, 2011). Power itself does not, Gallagher argues, bear any intentions, although its effects can be severely damaging (Foucault, 1980).

In the sociology of childhood, studies about participation and power have often focused on the way inherent inter-generational power struc-

---

11 How much room there is for agency in Foucault’s works has been debated (Boman, 2002; Rainbow, 2009). In what seems to be a less cited article, Gallagher (2008b) combines Foucault’s ideas with those of the philosopher de Certeau to allow for an understanding of power that acknowledges both structure and agency and the abundant ways of resisting in everyday life.

12 Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) also describe how children can exercise power to, for example resist and manipulate research instruments in various ways.
tures serve to circumscribe children and young people’s agency and participation (Holland, Reyold, Ross. & Hillman, 2010; Jones, 2008; Olk, 2009; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). It also seems important, however, to acknowledge the unequal power relations between individuals in the category children and young people and how some children and young people can suppress (and most likely also promote) other children and young people’s ability to enact agency and participate fully in their own lives (Brunnberg, 2003; Jansson, 2004).

II Children’s rights and the modern human rights system

In this section, the development of the idea of children and young people’s participation within the human rights framework is described. Before engaging with that topic, this section starts with an overview of the evolution of the human rights system as well as the development of various types of rights. This overview contextualises the role of participation in children’s rights and provides a back drop for how children and young people’s participation is interpreted in this research project.

Evolvement of the modern human rights system

According to human rights philosopher Norberto Bobbio (1996), human rights have developed through three important stages. The first stage was the emergence of eighteenth-century ideas about man as endowed by nature with certain fundamental rights. The second stage in the development of human rights was when ideas about natural rights were transformed into normative standards, tied to citizenship, and concretized as citizenship rights. The Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776), the American Bill of Rights (1789) and the French Declaration of the Man and the Citizen (1789) were among the first documents explicitly mentioning human rights to be incorporated into national constitutions. These are commonly referred to as the starting point of the modern construction of human rights (Chrom Jacobsen, 2013). The third stage in the development of human rights is said to be when rights moved from the local to the global level and became universally agreed entitlements. According to Bobbio, this is when the Age of Rights began. The Age of Rights is considered to be symbolized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter the ‘Declaration’, United Nations, 1948). Since then, a comprehensive human rights system has developed, and the rights in the Declaration have been complemented with further rights in various human rights instru-

The current human rights system includes five different kinds of rights, generally referred to as civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Sometimes the latter three are referred to as socio-economic rights. The various kinds of rights have been developed in different contexts, have different scopes, and protect various aspects of human life. They are also sometimes claimed to contradict each other, which depends on the fact that the various rights build on somewhat different rationalities, as will be described below.

The development of various types of rights
Rights thinking has evolved over several centuries and has, at different times, been influenced by ideas about freedom, social justice, social protection, and equality (Bring, 2000; Donnelly, 2013). The 18th century natural law philosophers and the crafters of the American and French constitutions were particularly concerned about human dignity, equality before the law, and freedom from political authority. These concerns were spurred by an urge to protect the individual from far reaching state interference. Consequently, the rights in these documents are mainly freedom rights, primarily created to provide the individual with some areas of freedom within the state (Chrom Jacobsen, 2013). The ideas about social protection and equality that served as a basis for the creation of rights demanding that the state play a more active role as a provider of protection and welfare for its citizens, are often described as being of a much later date (Donnelly, 2013).

When describing the evolvement of rights it is common to refer to T. H. Marshall’s (1949) model of social citizenship as based on entitlement to three different types of rights: civil, political and social. According to Marshall, these types of rights emerged in response to social and economic conditions that broadly can be grouped into three formative periods: the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The freedom rights that were incorporated into the American and French declarations were civil rights that included the right to life and integrity, to equality before the law, and to freedom of thought, conscience, speech, religion, and the press.

In Marshall’s model, the political rights emerged during the nineteenth century in the wake of capitalism and industrialism. At this time an emerging working class raised demands to be included in the political and eco-
nomic power structures, and advocacy for universal suffrage gained momentum (Freeman, 2011; Tilly, 1998). The political rights added an important dimension to the civil rights, as they granted citizens the possibility to participate in the governing of the state. Today’s political human rights include the right to a fair trial, freedom of association and assembly, and the right to vote.

The civil and political rights were mainly inspired by liberal ideas about individual freedom and independence. During the twentieth century, these ideas were challenged by socialist ideas about social equality, collectivism, and redistribution of assets. According to Marshall’s (1949) chronology, this is the context in which social rights, such as the right to work, education, health, and a certain level of economic welfare, enter the rights arena. Today’s economic, social and cultural human rights are socio-economic rights, and above and beyond the social rights described by Marshall they include the right to an adequate standard of living, and rights to housing, science, and culture. It has been debated whether the socio-economic human rights correspond to the social rights that Marshall associates with citizenship in welfare states. According to Davy (2013) the socio-economic human rights were originally grounded in a developmental and socialistic perspective, while the social rights in the welfare state were forged from a more liberal stance. From this difference follows the argument that the evolvement of socio-economic human rights and the evolvement of constitutional welfare rights were parallel rather than sequential processes (Davy, 2013). If it is correct to interpret the social rights within constitutional states and the socio-economic human rights as having diverse ideological heritages, this would explain why established Western welfare states were among the main opponents to the incorporation of socio-economic rights into the human rights framework (cf. Bring, 2000; Donnelly, 2013).

Human rights for everyone

Human rights were long restricted to those considered to be worthy rights bearers who could shoulder the responsibilities that bearing rights entailed. The ideal rights bearer was pictured to be a free, sane man who, based on his independence and rationality, could be trusted to act in order to pursue human fulfilment (Chrom Jacobsen, 2013). Unfree men, women, children, young people, and disabled persons were, due to their presumed lack of these virtues, considered to fare better without rights (Benhabib, 1992). Feminist researchers have criticized the human rights for being
‘male rights’, primarily protecting men’s interests and men’s types of social relations (Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1995). Along similar lines, childhood researchers (Ryan, 2008; Taefi, 2009) have criticized the human rights framework for prioritizing adults’ (and primarily male adults’) perspectives, leaving the female child in particular in a potentially precarious situation. A common criticism of the human rights framework is that it imposes Western values (Donnelly, 1982). Such a criticism has also been directed towards children’s rights (Boyden, 1990/97; Woodhead, 1998). Specific points of critique of the approach embodied in the CRC are that children’s and young people’s individual needs appear to go before group solidarity, that the child-parent relation is portrayed as more natural than family-community relations, and that schooling tends to be described as a more beneficial element of children’s and young people’s lives than working to contribute to the family economy. These points of critique emphasize the importance of caution in the promotion and realization of human rights and children’s rights.

Also Marshall’s model has been criticized on the grounds that it only describes how men, and particularly how English men, came to be entitled to rights (Holmwood, 2000). The model’s grouping of various types of rights into formative periods is questioned because it overlooks how each set of rights has laid the foundation for the next, and how every new type of rights has been preceded by great human struggles and sacrifices (Tilly, 1998). In contrast to Marshall’s description of rights as the result of social and economic changes, Stammers (2009) for example locates much of the origin and development of human rights within social movements and a striving to challenge dominating relations and structures of power within these movements. Despite these criticisms, there is a pedagogical point to presenting Marshall’s model in this section, since it helps to understand important differences between children and young people’s civil and political rights and those of adults.

One Declaration and two Covenants on human rights
As a declaration, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights carries moral authority about how to treat human beings. The Declaration was initially meant to be followed by a legally binding convention. Due to political disagreements, however, the Declaration came to be followed not by one, but by two human rights treaties: the Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966a) and the Covenant on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966b). The decision to divide the
human rights in this way was partly based on assumptions about fundamental differences between the various types of rights and partly based on ideological differences between countries. In 1966, when the Covenants were adopted, the Soviet block was for example generally sceptical toward civil and political rights. Western states, and most notably the USA, disparaged most economic, social and cultural rights, while these rights were highly prioritized by Latin-American states (Donnelly, 2013).

In human rights literature, the civil and political rights are sometimes referred to as first-generation rights, whereas the socio-economic rights are considered to be second-generation rights. Whenever this distinction is made, first- and second-generation rights are generally described as differing in implementation (absolute versus progressive); in justiciability (easily adjudicable by courts and judicial bodies versus not easily adjudicable by courts and judicial bodies); and expenditure (‘free’ of cost versus resource demanding and re-distributive). Such thinking has been criticized for creating an imaginary divide between various types of human rights (Bobbio, 1996). Langford (2008), for example, presents a large body of evidence for the justiciability of economic, social and cultural rights, and effective implementation of civil and political right often requires functioning redistributive systems (Eide, 2006).

The decision to divide the human rights into two covenants was controversial. It has since been criticized for being based on false assumptions and for failing to acknowledge the indivisibility of human rights. The division has also been contested by later human rights instruments that include different types of rights side by side. One of the best examples of this is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

Children and young people’s rights
Following Bobbio’s (1996) theories about the current phase in the Age of Rights, the CRC would embody human rights interpreted in the light of contemporary, or at least fairly recent, images of children, young people and childhoods (Hägglund, Quennerstedt & Thelander, 2013). Children’s rights, however, seem to have developed in an almost opposite fashion to human rights in general (Therborn, 1993). The specific chronology of children and young people’s rights, as compared to human rights, provide a definite context for how participation is interpreted in the children’s rights framework. This section therefore starts with a historical overview of the development of children’s rights.
Development of children’s rights – a different trajectory than human rights

The first international treaty to be adopted on children’s rights was the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (League of Nations, 1924). The Geneva Declaration was established by the League of Nations more than two decades before the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and made human rights a global concern. The main ambition of the Geneva Declaration was to generate international momentum for the protection of children and young people and to address adults’ duties in this work (Healy, 2008). The Geneva Declaration includes five articles stating children’s rights to be protected from various forms of exploitation, as well as adults’ obligations to provide for their needs and development. In 1959 the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and the children’s rights framework was expanded to encompass ten articles, including rights to social welfare and social security. In the Declaration it is stated that the child is entitled to the human rights but ‘by reason of his physical and mental immaturity needs special safeguards and care’ (United Nations, 1959, preamble). Both the 1924 and 1959 declarations on children’s rights were established at times when recent experiences of major wars (World Wars I and II) had put child protection and child welfare high on the international agenda.

The CRC was created in a quite different sociopolitical climate than its predecessors. The drafting of the Convention was initiated in 1979, a time marked by increased global awareness of social inequality, a growing emancipation movement, and the founding of social movements for the rights of women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities (Stammers, 2009). Besides the socio-political climate, the process of drafting the Convention was also influenced by the works of Janus Korczak 13 about respecting children and their opinions and emerging theories about children’s and young people’s subjectivity and agency (Verhellen, 2000). The rights in the previous treaties are derived from children and young people’s assumed need of protection due to their vulnerability and dependency on adults. The CRC, on the other hand, describes children and young people as competent human rights bearers who, due to their more vulner-

13 Janus Korczak (1878-1942) was a visionary author, doctor and educationalist. Korczak was an early proponent for children’s rights and applied children’s participation in the everyday work in an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II.
able position in society, also have a right to adult protection. The children’s rights framework is however different from the human rights framework since some of the rights in the children’s rights framework are dormant (for example the right to vote), qualified (by age and maturity), and supervised (by parents and legal guardians).

A substantial number of state representatives and representatives from non-governmental organizations were involved during the decade it took to finalize the drafting of the CRC. A major reason for the extended drafting period was the principle of consensus that was applied at the beginning of the work with the Convention. Some argue that this principle of consensus resulted in a convention so general and politically inclusive that it lost much of its potential power. Be that as it may, the capacity perspective in the CRC has contributed to elevating children and young people’s status in society and has opened up more arenas for children and young people to have their voices heard and considered.

With the CRC, children’s rights changed from being primarily about socio-economic rights to also including civil and political rights. This addition to the children’s rights framework occurred however at a time when ideologies of welfare and social justice had already spurred the creation of socio-economic human rights. Besides the implication that children received a specific entitlement to some civil and political rights much later than (most) adults, it also means that these rights were interpreted in the light of their already established socio-economic rights. The opposite direction of development of children’s rights as compared to human rights might be seen as weakening the claim that the rights in the CRC are the human rights interpreted according to the specific situation of children and young people (Invernizzi & Williams, 2008). Unlike the two Covenants on human rights, the CRC was created from a holistic perspective and includes all types of rights side by side. One might ask oneself why the international community succeeded in 1989 with what they were not able to accomplish in 1966. Was it because the political climate in the late 1980s had changed in such a way that former opponents were now ready to accept a unified treatment of civil, political, and socio-economic rights? Was it because children’s socio-economic rights were perceived to require a more direct realization than those for adults (van Bueren, 2008)? Or was it because children’s civil and political rights were perceived to require a

14 The Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities, for example, was adopted in 2006.
less direct realization than those of adults? Trying to answer these questions is outside the scope of this research project. They do however highlight potentially important differences between children’s rights and human rights and raise important points for critical reflections for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most comprehensive document on children’s rights so far. It includes 54 articles divided into three parts: articles about children’s rights (Articles 1–41), articles about monitoring the implementation of the Convention (Articles 42–45), and articles about the processes connected to the signing and ratification of the Convention (Articles 46–54). The articles on children’s rights rest on four core principles that occupy a special position in the Convention (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). These are ‘non-discrimination’, ‘devotion to the best interest of the child’, ‘the right to life, to survival and development’, and ‘respect for the views of the child’. Each principle is embodied in a specific article, but the principles are also general since they are to be taken into consideration in interpreting and implementing all the other rights in the Convention.

The non-discrimination principle is described as embodied in Article 2, which grants the rights in the CRC to every child irrespective of ‘race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status’ (United Nations, 1989). Notably, the CRC was the first human rights treaty to include disability as a prohibited ground for discrimination (van Bueren, 2008) and Article 23 in the Convention is specifically dedicated to the rights of children and young people with disabilities. The principle of devotion to the best interest of the child has a long tradition in the children’s rights framework (United Nations, 1959). In the CRC, this principle is described in Article 3 and it has been interpreted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) as a right, a principle, and a rule of procedure. It is considered to be a right of children and young people to have their best interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration before other interests when making decisions that will affect their lives individually or as a collective. Legal provisions that allow for more than one interpretation shall always be interpreted in the best interest of children and young people. It is also a rule of procedure that whenever a decision is to be
made that might have an effect on children’s and young people’s lives, individually or collectively, the procedure must include evaluations of potential negative and positive effects of the decision on their lives. The right to life is a fundamental civil right in the human rights framework. In the CRC, this right is interpreted in terms of the conditions of childhood and is considered to include the right to development of personality and capacities. The principle of right to life, survival and development is embodied in Article 6 of the CRC. The fourth and last principle is about respecting the views of children and young people and is considered to be embodied in Article 12 of the CRC. The first paragraph of Article 12 of the CRC reads:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989, Article12 §1)

At the time when the CRC was drafted, Article 12 was considered an innovative and radical element of the children’s rights framework (Bartely, 1998; Freeman, 2009). It implies that children and young people are competent to form their own opinions about their lives and that these opinions are worth considering (Lee, 2005). The words ‘capable’, ‘age’ and ‘maturity’ in the text of the article indicate however that this right is qualified. Age, however, it has been argued, has very little to do with the capacity of a specific child in a concrete situation. Just treating children and young people with respect has been claimed to markedly increase their competence to make decisions that can have profound impacts on their lives (Alderson, 1993). A child’s or young person’s capacity to take part in decision-making will probably be more affected by other factors such as the social and cultural context, previous experiences, the specific type of capability required in the concrete situation, and whether or not the child or young person wants to participate (Bühler, 2005; James, 2009).

Do children and young people have a right to participation?
Since the adoption of the CRC a large part of children’s rights research has been directed towards children and young people’s participation, and especially towards children and young people’s right to participation (Reynaert et al., 2010). The term participation occurs twice in the CRC: in relation to the active participation of the disabled child in the community
(Article 23) and in relation to the child suspect’s right to obtain the participation of witnesses (Article 40). When children’s rights researchers refer to children’s right to participation it is however usually in connection to Article 12 and the principle of respecting the views of the child (Lansdown, 2001; Shier, 2001). Lundy (2007) however has argued that although ‘the right to participation’ might be a convenient shorthand for describing the core message of Article 12 in the CRC, it is an imperfect summary that misses out on other important key elements of the article such as information, audience, and influence.

Sometimes a set of rights are referred to as “participation rights”. In these cases, Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association), article 16 (right to privacy), and Article 17 (access to information) are among the rights that are often viewed as participation rights together with Article 12. The practice of treating the principle of respecting the views of the child as an example of the right to participation seems to have fed back into the monitoring system of the Convention. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), for example, defines participation as processes of ‘exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children’s lives’ (p. 5: 13).

One reason why the concept of children’s right to participation has become popular is probably the widespread habit of summarizing the rights in the CRC with the model of the three P’s. The three P’s stand for Protection, Provision and Participation, which are claimed to form indivisible and complementary principles of children’s rights15 (van Bueren, 1998). In contemporary children’s rights literature, it is not unusual however to refer to these principles as rights in themselves (Alderson, 2000; James, Curtis & Birch, 2008). To refer to the three P’s as rights has however been criticized by Quennerstedt (2010) for contributing to the development of a more vague rights language for children’s rights than for human rights. The use of the concept of provision, she notes, ascribes more passive characteristics to its bearer than the concepts of social, economic and cultural rights which have been described as the human rights equivalent (Lansdown, 1994). In the model of the three P’s, protection is related to the principle of protecting children and young people from abuse, neglect and

15 Sometimes a fourth P is added, and the model then reads Protection, Prevention, Provision and Participation (van Bueren, 1998).
exploitation. When this principle is referred to as a set of protection rights within the CRC, it might indicate that children have a special set of rights that are not included anywhere else in the human rights framework. Quennerstedt (2010; see also Ang et al., 2006; Tisdall, 2008) is also critical of the way the concept of participation rights tends to downplay children and young people’s civil and political rights by disguising them as participation. She argues that compared to the former, the term participation ‘lacks a theoretical foundation that endorses specified rights claims’ (Quennerstedt, 2010, p. 630).

Another problem with interpreting the three P’s as representing three different types of rights is that it seems to pave the way for arguments that the rights in the CRC conflict with each other. It is often said that there is a contradiction between children’s protection rights and participation rights (e.g. Lurie, 2003). Such statements indicate an understanding that children’s participation will take them outside the realm where adults can protect them, and that the duty of adults to protect children includes restricting their activities in the participatory arena (Vis, Holtan & Thomas, 2012). But participation and protection have also been described as complementary parts of children’s rights. Eriksson and Näsman (2008), for example, describe how, in the context of child welfare, participation makes it possible for children’s experiences to be made visible, validated and considered in a way that prevents exposure to abuse and neglect and promotes recovery from them. Interpreted in this way, participation is regarded as a necessary element of effective child protection. Protection, on the other hand, is considered an important principle for providing a climate where children and young people feel safe to disclose their experiences and where these experiences are dealt with in ways that recognize their more vulnerable situation.

III Common grounds and a shared dilemma
There is a lot of common ground between sociology of childhood and the children’s rights framework. Central overlaps being the understandings of children and young people as competent social agents of full human status; as important providers of first-hand information about their lives and relations; and as belonging to a minority group in society.

Within both the sociology of childhood and children’s rights research, researchers have tended to take on an advocacy role, promoting children and young people as social actors and as autonomous rights bearers with the capacity to participate and take responsibility themselves (see e.g. Ma-
yall, 2002; Verhellen, 2000). There is however disagreement about whether autonomy and responsibility are virtues to which children and young people are entitled as rights bearers, or whether they are demands placed on them (Bühl-Niederberger, 2010; Gallagher, 2008a). Reynaert et al., (2010) for example caution that one of the side effects of a preoccupation with agency and competence is that children are increasingly expected to know their own needs and to deal with them adequately. Thus, the responsibility to enact agency, to make successful choices, to realize one’s rights, and to promote one’s well-being and education increasingly come to lie with children themselves, while the constraining effects of social conditions risk being downplayed (see also Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2014).

**Children and young people’s agency and competence**

An argument that has been used against children and young people’s participation is their limited capacity for self-determination. This argument is based on the understanding that children and young people are less capable of making wise choices because they are less independent and rational than adults (Hafen & Hafen, 1996; Purdy, 1992). Scholars within the sociology of childhood and children’s rights research have frequently challenged this understanding by describing children’s and young people’s capacities in decision-making about issues that concerns them (Alderson, 1993; Smart et al., 2001). Such studies have been valuable in contesting assumptions about independence and rationality as primarily adult epithets. However, interdependence and irrationality have also been contested as primarily child and youth epithets (Lee, 2001). Reflecting on children’s citizenship, Lister (2008) finds parallels in the writings of Iris Marion Young, who distinguishes between two different understandings of independence: as autonomy and as self-sufficiency. According to Young (1995) autonomy refers to the ability to make choices about one’s life and to act upon these choices. Self-sufficiency, on the other hand, means ‘not needing help or support from anyone in meeting one’s needs and acting out one’s life plans’ (pp. 548–549). If independence is interpreted in the latter sense, children and young people fail to live up to an important virtue of the citizen and the rights bearer, but a large portion of humanity do so as well.

Researchers in childhood studies have tried alternative ways to think about human agency and participation – as grounded in dependencies, and produced and negotiated through relations with others (Lee, 1998; 2005; Lister, 2003; Prout, 2011; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). One
such alternative is found in how feminist writers have elaborated upon an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) as an alternative to an ethics of justice for describing human relations.

The ethics of care constitutes a heterogeneous academic field. Central themes however are that care rather than justice, and mutual needs rather than rights, are recognized as salient features of everyday human life. The ethics of care is an ethical position about care and mutuality as central characteristics of human life. Rights concepts that emphasize rationality, autonomy, and individuality are, in this view, criticized for ignoring that all human beings are interdependent and embedded in relationships with others (Meagher & Parton, 2004). According to Cockburn (2007) the ethics of care contributes to studies about children’s and young people’s participation by recognizing that children’s and young people’s everyday interactions tend to be regulated by dependencies, affection, and mutual needs rather than principles about equality, rights, and accountability. Another valuable contribution from the ethics of care to childhood studies is the understanding that children’s and young people’s capacities to self-determination and agency are embedded and situated in moral deliberations and interdependencies with others (see also Lee, 2005; Prout, 2011). There are however also some potential problems pf applying a perspective of ethics of care to children and young people’s participation (2005a; 2007). Three of these are described below.

**An ethics of care in childhood studies – potential problems**

The *first* concern, when adopting an ethics of care approach in childhood studies, is the contested nature of its principal concept – *care*. While care can be about empowerment, recognition, trust and growth in mutually respecting relationships, it can also be patronizing, possessive, and oppressive (Cockburn, 2007). If care is understood in the latter sense it stands in direct opposition to how the practice of participation is thought to promote capacity building, development and equality for children and young people.

A *second* concern is that scholars within the ethics of care have tended to focus on the views of those who care rather than on those who are

---

16 The same criticism can however be made of the concept of participation as is described in the introductory chapters of this thesis.

17 The focus seems primarily to have been on the various roles of women as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters.
being cared for (Cockburn, 2007). Although many children are also caregivers, for example for their siblings, parents, and grandparents (Evans, 2014), a significant feature of children’s lives is that they are considered to be cared for. There is therefore a risk of the ethics of care assigning more priority to the perspective of the caregiver than to the one being cared for, thus replicating unequal power positions and structures in intergenerational interactions. Just as in the case of their rights, children tend to have little influence over the way their care and needs are defined (Woodhead, 1990/97). In child protection cases, a rights-based approach seems however to provide an additional quality to the procedure of determining the best interest of the child. Whereas what is in the best interest of the child is open for negotiations in both the needs-based and rights-based approach, it is only in the latter that the enablement of children’s and young people’s participation will be considered a necessary quality criterion for a proper handling of child protection cases.

A third consideration connected to adopting an ethics of care in childhood studies is that many children and young people live in relationships that are both destructive and oppressive. In these relationships, rights, justice and equality might be more powerful values for protection of children’s and young people’s lives and well-being than are values of needs and care (Cockburn, 2005a).

Drawing on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, Thomas (2012) argues that children and young people’s participation arises from a combination of care and rights. Care, solidarity and mutuality are undoubtedly vital values in human life and are the realities of many children’s and young people’s everyday lives. In this research project, however, a rights perspective is used, based on it being understood to regard children and young people as competent social agents and fully fledged human beings worthy of respect from the day they are born. A rights perspective also provides a tool for understanding power relations between children and young people as a group in relation to adults as being based on different social statuses rather than on individual characteristics. From such a perspective, adult’s enablement of children and young people’s participation is a duty deriving from their more prioritized social position, rather than an act of generosity and welfare towards children and young people.

A framework for the research project
The theoretical frameworks on children and young people in the sociology of childhood and children’s rights inform how, in this research project,
young people are considered as valuable research partners and respondents. The idea that children and young people are competent social actors with their own ideas about their lives, everyday experiences, and future inspires the aim and research questions in this project. This understanding also lays the foundation for how the young people in this research project are treated and how their contributions are valued. Children and young people’s perceptions and experiences are viewed as important since they provide an inside perspective alongside other perspectives on children and young people’s participation in school.

The generational perspective in the sociology of childhood informs the distinction in this research project between intra- and inter-generational perspectives. The understanding that children’s and young people’s agencies and competencies are embedded in and conditioned by relations with adults (as increasingly promoted in the sociology of childhood and in the children’s rights framework) informs the role of adults as facilitators of young people’s participation applied in this research project.
The research field

In this chapter research about children and young people’s participation in general and in schools in particular is presented. Much research about children and young people’s participation has taken the form of empirical studies and has emerged from reflections on practice (Thomas, 2012). There tends to be a close connection in childhood research between theoretical elaborations on children and young people’s participation and empirical studies about their participation. This chapter describes the various ways participation has been understood and explored by other researchers in empirical studies within the field of childhood research and children and young people’s participation.

Arguments for children and young people's participation

Children and young people’s participation takes place in various arenas and in various contexts such as governmental commissions (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2013); community work (Shier, 2010), organizations and associations (Save the Children, 2000); child protection (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan & Thomas, 2011); health care (Franklin & Sloper, 2005); research (Brembeck et al., 2010, Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009); schools (Lundy, 2007; Rosvall, 2012); and families (Persson, 2009). Arguments that appear to be common in promoting children and young people’s participation in these various arenas and contexts are that participation is believed to lead to beneficial outcomes in the following four areas:

- children and young people’s personal and social development;
- the improvement of child and youth services and programmes;
- fulfilling the legal and moral rights of children and young people; and
- children and young people’s well-being and health (Cashmore, 2002; Checkoway, 2011; Head, 2011; Kjörholt, 2002).

Depending on what arguments and understandings that provide the backdrop for children and young people’s participation, the research focus might be somewhat different. When participation is understood as a right, and as promoting children and young people’s development, the processes of participation might be just as important as its outcome. When participation is expected to promote children and young people’s well-being, and
to increase the effectiveness of welfare services for children and young people, the focus might be on the actual outcome of participation. Vis et al. (2012) caution however that when the outcomes of participation are believed to be more valuable than the processes, children and young people’s participation might be de-prioritized in situations when there is little room for them to have any actual influence on the outcome of such processes. In the following, each of the above-mentioned arguments for children and young people’s participation is explained in more detail.

**Participation for personal and social development**
When researchers promote children and young people’s participation because of its beneficial effects for their development, it is often based on empirical studies where participation is described as having improved children and young people’s learning, social skills, communication skills, and democratic capacities (Ahlström, 2010; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004). Some childhood researchers criticize using a developmentally based argument for participation on the grounds that the benefits of participation are pushed into the future, and the children and young people are viewed as future adults rather than as human beings here and now. With this follows a risk of missing out on the multiple ways that children and young people already participate and contribute to society, for example by going to school, taking part in local organizations, and being part of relationships with family and friends (Clemens, 2008; Qvortrup, 2009). Martin and Franklin (2010) caution that promoting participation on developmental grounds risks disadvantaging certain groups of children and young people that might be less expected to enact their participation skills as future adults. Such groups are for example those with certain kinds of disabilities and those who, due to severe illness, are less likely ever to reach adulthood.

**Participation for the improvement of services and programmes**
In their role as users of welfare services, children and young people can participate in the planning and evaluation of such services and programmes, which is understood to provide valuable information from an insider perspective (see e.g. Fern & Kristindottir, 2011). Researchers seem to use the ‘insider’ argument from both a consumerist and a democratic perspective. From a consumerist perspective, children and young people’s participation is believed to increase the uptake and efficacy of child and youth services (McLaughlin, 2005). From a democratic perspective, partic-
ipation is valued for its potential to provide alternative ways of understanding the topic of research (Sundberg, Forsberg & Lundberg, 2006). From the consumerist approach, some researchers have expressed concern about children and young people becoming so skilled and experienced in negotiations and decision-making procedures with adults that they may no longer be in touch with the interests of the groups they are supposed to be representing (Faulkner, 2009).

One of the criticisms of using the insider argument for children and young people’s participation is that such initiatives can expect the involved children and young people to represent the interests of a sometimes very large group of children and young people and sometimes of a whole generation. Some researchers argue that the shared generational experience of children and young people overrides any internal differences between individuals within the category (Cockburn, 2005b; Jans, 2004; Mayall, 2002). Others however are critical of the fact that the children and young people who get involved in participatory settings with adults tend to be the most outspoken, well-behaved, and in other ways privileged individuals in that group (Checkoway, 2011; Thomas, 2007).

**Participation as a legal and moral right**

In the 1970s child liberationists claimed that all forms of discrimination against children and young people violated the fundamental human rights value of the equality of all human beings. The only ethically and morally sound thing to do, they argued, was to grant children and young people full access to the whole set of political, civil, economic, social and cultural human rights (Farson, 1974; Holt 1975). Childhood researchers today tend to be less radical and seem to have settled for participation rather than children and young people having full access to the civil and political human rights. There is however an ongoing debate in childhood research about whether the rights in the CRC promote understandings of children as semi-citizens (Milne, 2005), non-citizens or another kind of citizens (Cockburn, 2005; Lister, 2008; Wood Bronwyn, 2013).

Much research based on the rights argument for children and young people’s participation has focused on participation in decision-making together with adults. From a rights perspective, however, there is also an alternative discourse where participation and equality are ideological concepts connected to the everyday lives of children and young people (Thomas, 2007). This type of rights perspective seems mostly to have been developed within disability research (Gustavsson, 2004) with a focus on
the right of children and young people with disabilities to full participation in society (Eriksson, 2006; Granlund, 2013; Simeonsson et al., 2003). In these studies, the CRPD (United Nations, 2006) and the World Health Organization’s (2001; 2007) classification instrument ‘International classification of functioning, disability and health’ (ICF) are often used as guiding frameworks.

Some researchers (Beazley, Besell, Ennew & Waterson, 2009; Ennew, 2009) claim that a right for children and young people ‘to be properly researched’ is sanctioned by the CRC. This right, they argue, includes the rights to information, to providing opinions, and for research to be conducted to the highest achievable standard and in the best interest of children and young people (Beazley et al., 2009). The notion of a right to be properly researched has however been harshly criticized by Alderson (2012). Apart from pointing out that there is no such right in the CRC, Alderson argues that the invention of a certain right of children and young people to be properly researched has far reaching implications for childhood research. The use of a rights-terminology, she states, implies for example that taking part in research would be a basic right of all children and young people. As a basic right, there would be an assumption that involvement in research would always be something beneficial for children and young people. This assumption overlooks the fact that research can also have negative effects on children and young people. It also tends to overlook that there may be activities other than research that children and young people would prefer to be involved in.

**Participation for well-being and health**

Childhood researchers sometimes promote participation in various contexts with the argument that it is beneficial for children and young people’s feelings of self-worth, personal efficacy, self-confidence, and sense of connectedness and belonging (Delens-Ravier, 2006, Persson, 2009). In child protection, for example participation is associated with an increased sense of mastery and control in the child or young person, strengthened relationships with social work professionals and family members, and increased chances for identification of abuse and neglect (Vis et al., 2011).

It is difficult to find any research where participation is reported to have been directly harmful for children and young people. There are however frequent warnings in the childhood literature against tokenistic involvement of children and young people (Alderson, 1999; Lansdown, 2010). Childhood researchers also caution about the importance of not forgetting
the right of children and young people to choose non-participation (Lewis, 2010). The right to non-participation is often related to evaluations or research settings. Within welfare institutions such as schools and the social services, children and young people tend to have fewer options for negotiating their participation. In these settings, research indicates that it might be of extra importance to consider the frames within which children and young people are expected to enact their participation (Cashmore, 2002).

**Participation in research**

The various arguments for children and young people’s participation have fed into research where children and young people are increasingly regarded as participants in research (Brembeck et al., 2010, Christensen & James, 2008; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Hill, Davis, Prout & Tidsall, 2004; Hillén, 2013; Powell & Smith, 2009). Childhood researchers who want to conduct research together with children and young people can turn to specific textbooks and handbooks describing various methodologies, methods, and ethical considerations that apply when doing research with children and young people (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson, 2004; Westwood, Larkins, Moxon, Perry & Thomas, 2014; Tisdall et al., 2009). Christensen and James (2008) describe this development within childhood studies as a shift from doing research on children and young people to doing research with them. The theoretical positions for promoting children and young people’s participation can be quite different (see Tisdall et al., 2009 for a good overview). Fielding (2010, see also Delens Ravier 2006; Mayall 2002; Nolas 2011) states however that participatory research initiatives with children and young people tend to start from the key assumptions that children’s and young people’s perspectives are potentially different from those of adults in interesting ways; that gaining access to children’s and young people’s perspectives is difficult unless they themselves are involved in research processes; and that if researchers manage to create conditions for mutual engagement and dialogue with children and young people about issues that matter to them, children’s and young people’s perspectives can potentially provide more complex and fuller understandings of these issues.

In much research with children and young people it seems however as if they are expected to enact their voices and participation in certain ways. This commonly involves some elements of artistic performance such as putting on a play, rapping, recording a video, or drawing pictures (Punch, 2002). This tendency for researchers, as well as professionals, to assume
that children and young people’s participation will take other forms than adults’ participation may create obstacles for children and young people who do not choose the expected modes of participation. If children and young people express themselves – their needs and desires – loud and clear, but by rationales that do not make sense or are not acceptable from adults’ standpoints, they risk being judged as too cognitively immature to have their voices considered in decision-making (Fielding, 2004). If, on the other hand, children and young people make their voices heard by using the same or similar modes of expression as adults do, their voices risk being discredited for being manipulated\(^\text{18}\) by adults or dismissed as unrepresentative of children and young people in general.

### Requests for more inclusive models and definitions

Many of the models in childhood research on children and young people’s participation (Hart, 1992; Rocha, 1997; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997; Westhorp, 1987) classify their participation into different stages. Such models are now increasingly being criticized by childhood researchers due to their tendency to be biased towards a western liberal perspective on children and young people’s participation (Hinton, 2008; Mason & Bolzsan, 2010; see also Hart, 2008; Shier, 2010); to only acknowledge adult initiated and designed forms of children and young people’s participation (Malone & Hartung, 2010); to imply that more participation is always better participation (Head, 2011; Treseder, 1997); to treat power as an asset that adults can control and choose to share or not to share with children and young people (Gallagher, 2008a); and to exaggerate differences between children, young people and adults while downplaying differences between various groups of children and young people (Burke, 2007; Fielding, 2007; Mannion, 2010). Instead contemporary childhood researchers seem to request models of participation that also include less recognized forms of participation and that recognize the importance of such things as mutuality, shared experiences, dialogue, and collective action for children and young people’s participation (Kirby & Laws, 2010; 

---

\(^{18}\) This was personally experienced when I participated in a conference about the contributions of youth participation in 2013. When the young conference participants made their presentation, they were questioned for using the same presentation techniques (power point and oral presentation) as the adult participants. The young participants replied that if young people have something important to say, adults should be able to listen no matter how they choose to express themselves.
Wood Bronwyn (2013, see also Jupp, 2008), for example, argues that participation has an affective dimension that has not been adequately understood in research about children and young people’s participation.

According to Malone and Hartung (2010, see also Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Tisdall, 2008) key challenges for future childhood studies are the narrow definitions of participation often provided in the traditional models of children and young people’s participation; the way participation has become under-theorized and over-practised; and the lack of models including child-initiated forms of participation. One strategy that childhood researchers seem to be using to tackle these challenges is to turn to theories external to the field of childhood research, such as for example recognition theory (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Thomas, 2012), theories of deliberative democracy (Cockburn, 2010; Thomas, 2007) and theories about community development (Percy-Smith, 2006). Valuable features of these theories seem to be that they allow for recognizing social participation as a vital aspect of children’s and young people’s lives, that they problematize agency as an individual asset, and that they emphasize reciprocal relationships between generations.

In an attempt to adopt a more inclusive approach to participation, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) suggest a definition of participation as ‘manifestation of individual agency within a social context’ (p. 357). This suggestion is in line with the requests for broader definitions of children and young people’s participation (Alderson, 2010). The question, however, is whether such inclusive definitions also involve a risk of diluting the concept of participation to the point of meaning almost anything (Mathew, Martelli, Bertozzi & de Luigi, 2010).

**Participation in school**

It seems as if research about participation in school can be broadly divided into studies that view participation as influence in school and that view it as involvement in school (see Thomas, 2007). In studies about participation as influence in school, democracy theories and children’s rights are often used as frameworks, with related concepts seeming to be information, impact, and consultation (Bergström & Holm, 2005; Lundy, 2007). In such studies, participation is primarily seen as taking place in relationships between children, young people and adults. Studies focusing on participation as involvement in school appear to mostly have been conducted within disability studies (Eriksson, 2006; Simeonsson et al.,
and to be related to the right of children and young people with disabilities to full participation in society. Two concepts that are often related to participation as involvement in school are engagement and inclusion (Molin, 2004; Szönyi, 2005). In studies about participation as involvement, both student-teacher and student-student relationships have been the focus of research (Jansson, 2004). Below an overview of studies about children and young people’s participation in the school context is provided. Since a substantial share of the young people participating in the present study report having a disability, a section is also included in this chapter about research on participation in school for children and young people with disabilities.

**Participation as influence**

In the school context, research about children and young people’s participation has explored research questions like the following: Which children and young people participate in decision making? Concerning what topics are children and young people allowed to take part in decision making? What effects does children and young people’s participation have on decision making? How can children and young people be helped to take part in decision making in school? Participation in decisions about the contents and processes of education has been connected with the development of children’s and young people’s academic and democratic competencies (Ahlström, 2010); increased satisfaction with the school environment and educational setting (Selberg, 2001); increased self-efficacy; and feelings of control and responsibility in school (Allodi, 2010; Simovska, 2007). Schools with a high level of student participation in decision making are also described as more in tune with students’ needs (Flutter & Ruddock, 2004).

Sometimes, membership in school councils is used to measure children and young people’s participation in democratic decision making in schools. However, Lundy (2007, see also Alderson, 1999), drawing upon findings from a large-scale audit among students in Britain and Northern Ireland, concludes that school councils tend to be run according to adult controlled agendas; that the issues students are allowed to raise tend to be uncontroversial; that students are excluded from decision making on really important issues; and that students’ views have little effect on the final decision. The capacity of school councils to represent the voices of children and young people in disadvantaged and socially excluded positions has been questioned by Wyness (2009). Most research about children and
young people’s participation in school councils seems to have been conducted in a British context. In a comparative European study, the Scandinavian countries were described as among the counties with the most highly developed structures for student participation (Davis & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Tomey-Purta & Barber, 2005).

A school climate where students are encouraged and helped to take part in decision making, where there are supportive relationships between teachers and students as well as among students, and where there are positive social norms of interdependence and respect is described as beneficial for children and young people’s participation in school (Quennerstedt, 2014; Simovska, 2007).

Beyond voice
Sometimes in research about children and young people’s influence in school, participation is constructed as a ‘pupil voice’ or ‘student voice’ (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006). Burke (2007) is however critical of how the expression ‘student voice’ implies that all children and young people have a unified standpoint in matters that concern them. Another criticism is expressed by Lundy (2007), who argues that emphasizing voice risks leaving out other related and crucial elements of children and young people’s participation in school such as ‘information’, ‘audience’, and ‘influence’. Student participation, she says, requires that children and young people are provided with the opportunity to express a view (information); that they are facilitated to express these views (voice); that their views are listened to (audience); and that their views are acted upon in an appropriate manner (influence) (Lundy, 2007).

That there is more to the concept of participation in school than pupil voice or student voice also seems to be indicated in the way childhood researchers tend to use various prefixes in connection with the concept of participation. In the school context, Smith (2007) for example uses the term ‘effective participation’ to describe educational decision-making processes where children and young people have an input, can exercise some control over educational goals, and are allowed to take responsibility for reaching those goals. In relation to physical education, Enright and O’Sullivan (2012) use the concept ‘authentic participation’ to describe the difference between involving children and young people in decision-making about issues that are directly connected to their lives and involving them in decision-making of little relevance for their lives. Outside the school context other concepts are also in use, such as ‘genuine participa-
tion’ (Delens-Ravier, 2006), where children and young people are involved in defining the basic objectives of their participation; ‘active participation’, where ‘children believe, and have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference’ (Sinclair, 2004, p. 111); and ‘meaningful participation’, defined as “dialogue which involves both listening to the voices of children and young people and responding constructively to them” (Hatton, 2014, p. 44). Qualifying participation as effective, authentic, or genuine implies that participation also can be ineffective, false, and tokenistic. The introduction of such dichotomies can lead to participation becoming an either-or concept. Although the traditional models of participation are increasingly criticized, one of their strong points is that they describe participation more as a continuum and as having various degrees, rather than an either-or concept. This seems important not least in schools where various forms of children and young people’s participation can be more or less appropriate depending on the context (Molin, 2004), the specific questions, and the ability and desire of students to participate.

**Participation as involvement**

Viewing participation as involvement in school, researchers have explored research questions such as the following: What are key elements of the construct of participation? How can participation be measured? What are the barriers to children and young people’s participation? Based on an understanding of participation as involvement in everyday school life, participation is described as supporting children and young people’s academic achievements (Finn & Cox, 1992); enabling children and young people to explore their potentials (Law et al., 2006); and leading to greater satisfaction in life (Hintermair, 2010; Huebner, Drane & Valois, 2000; Mattsson, 2008).

Much school-related research about participation as involvement has focused on students with disabilities. Within the disability field, participation is described as deriving from the closely related concepts of inclusion and social integration (Haug, 1998; Hill et al., 2004; Gustavsson, 2004). From this perspective, researchers have identified various aspects and dimensions of the participatory concept. Molin (2004) for example, having made a semantic analysis of participation within the disability field, identifies engagement, autonomy, involvement, interaction, belonging and power as various components of the concept. He also distinguishes between intra (e.g. autonomy) and interpersonal (e.g. interaction) forms of participation, arguing that both forms are necessary in order to speak of the
individual as fully participating (Molin, 2004). Within the same field Janson (2004) divides participation into objective aspects (belonging, accessibility, collective action) and subjective aspects (engagement, autonomy, acceptance) and argues that both objective and subjective aspects need to be present in order for participation to occur.

**Students with disabilities**

In relation to children and young people without disabilities, children and young people with disabilities are often described as a group with low participation in school (Coster et al., 2013; Eriksson, 2006). Students with disabilities have been found to take part in school related activities less frequently¹⁹ than students without disabilities. They are also described as being less engaged with these activities and enjoying them to a lesser degree (Coster et al., 2013; Egilson & Traustsadottir, 2009; Eriksson, Weland & Granlund, 2007). There does however seem to be some variance depending on the type of activity. While students with disabilities tend to rank their participation in unstructured activities and during breaks lower than other students, some studies describe how students with disability seem to appreciate and enjoy their relationships with teachers to a higher degree than students without disabilities (Eriksson, 2006). Other studies show that students with disabilities have more conflicts with peers and teachers. At the same time, they are described as having a greater risk of being exposed to bullying and degrading treatment (Bengtsson, Hansen & Røgeskov, 2011; Brunnberg, Lindén-Boström & Berglund, 2007). In studies about interactions between compulsory school students with and without disabilities, participation on others’ terms has been described as a specific characteristic of the participation of students with disabilities (Bagga-Gupta, 2006; see also Brunnberg, 2003; Nordström, 2002).

Limited access, lack of recognition, and insufficient support are identified as common participatory barriers for students with disabilities (Eriksson, 2006). According to Coster et al. (2013), one explanation of the low participation of students with disabilities lies in the physical, cognitive and

---

¹⁹ Studies that have focused on children’s and young people’s involvement in everyday school life usually measure participation as the frequency with which the individual takes part in an activity/activities and the intensity with which the individual engages with the activity (Eriksson, 2006; Granlund, 2013; Niia, Almqvist, Brunnberg & Granlund, 2013; Simeonsson et al., 2001). Intensity is regarded as a subjective measure that requires the inclusion of the child or young person’s own experience of the situation (Nilsson et al., 2013).
social demands of typical school activities in compulsory schools. However, students with disabilities themselves identify low expectations and teachers’ tendencies to underestimate their capacity to take part in the same activities as their able bodied peers as significant barriers to their participation (Szöniy & Söderqvist Dunkers, 2012). In two studies (Eriksson, 2006; Simeonsson et al., 2001) comparing participation patterns for different kinds of disabilities, type and severity of disability were found to be only moderately associated with the frequency and intensity with which the student participated in various activities in school.

What do young people say?

In a study by Bergström and Holm (2005), young people mention things like feeling included; understanding and knowing; having fun together; belonging; and being together with friends as important aspects of participation in school. In another study conducted by Göransson (2008), students describe a good atmosphere, student influence and collaborations between students during structured as well as unstructured activities as factors that promote their participation in school. In Göransson’s study, students both with and without disabilities participated in focus groups. In a study by Eriksson (2006) students define the participation concept as including such components as the experience of involvement, being actively involved, and availability of activities and information.

It seems as if the majority of children and young people want to be actively involved in processes surrounding their teaching and learning (Simovska, 2007). According to Cattrijse and Delens-Ravier (2006, see also Warming, 2011) children and young people tend to regard participation as comprising processes of relationship building and developing trust, rather than as one-off instances of decision making. Contrary to what some adults assume (and sometimes fear) children and young people do not seem to regard participation as a direct route to having things exactly the way they want them to be. Children and young people expect and understand that decision making often involves processes of negotiation and compromise between differing interests. Instead of wanting to decide everything on their own, children and young people have been described as considering being able to speak their views, being considered valued members of decision-making processes, and being kept informed as more important outcomes of participation than having things exactly the way they want (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Children and young people do however seem to make a clear distinction between situations where adults listen to
their views and take them into account and situations where adults discuss with young people and reach agreements with them. The latter is described by young people as preferable, since it makes them feel more respected, valued, and competent (Moxon, 2014).

**Relevance of this research project**

Characteristic of the vast majority of research about participation in school is that it has been conducted from an adult perspective. But the voices of children and young people are also important for achieving a fuller understanding of participation in school. Only a few of the studies presented in this chapter include children’s and young people’s voices on participation in school. The body of research from children’s and young people’s perspectives on participation in school seems to be relatively small, compared to that from adults’ perspectives, and there seems to be a lack of studies about participation in school that include children and young people in the data-collection and analysis phases of research processes (Bergström & Holm, 2005; Elvstrand, 2009). There also seems to be a lack in the current research field of models for participation in school constructed from young people’s perspectives. The inclusion of young people in research about participation in school has the potential to bring additional aspects of participation to light than those identified from adults’ perspectives. Such aspects can be important pieces of information in building policies that are in tune with young people’s everyday lives and that are inclusive rather than exclusive.
Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to explore young people’s perspectives on and experiences of participation in school. This comprehensive aim is specified in four research questions: How can young people be involved in research in order to explore young people’s participation? How can young people apply their perspectives in research settings together with adults? What are important aspects of participation in school from intra- and intergenerational perspectives? What are the differences in young people’s experiences in school when disability and gender are considered? The research questions are discussed and answered in four empirical studies (Studies 1–4). In the following, references will be made to these studies. This is to avoid lengthy repetitions of methodological descriptions and considerations that are included in the empirical studies. Brief summaries of the four studies are provided in the next chapter of this thesis, but for a more thorough understanding of the overall methodology of this research project, reading the empirical studies is recommended.

Design

The overall design of this research project is explorative, with both inductive and deductive elements. In accordance with the theoretical frameworks on children and young people used here, the research project has been designed to start from young people’s perspectives and let these inspire and guide inquiries about young people’s participation in school. The explorative design made it possible for the research questions, methods, and analyses to be specified as the research process unfolded, and each of the empirical studies is informed by the one previous to it. The research project also has a mixed methods design (Creswell, 2009; Johnson, Anthony, Onwuegbuzie & Turner 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010), as both qualitative and quantitative research was used to answer the aim and research questions of this thesis (Bryman, 2006).

Both interactive and more traditional research approaches have been used in this research project. In the more traditional research approach, research is conducted with young people as respondents. In the interactive research approach, research is conducted with young people as research partners in a research circle. Before moving on to describe the procedures and participants in this research project, some space will be devoted to introducing the basic premises of interactive research as well as describing the research circle as an arena for interactive research.
Interactive research

The concept of interactive research has been introduced by a group of researchers in Sweden (Svensson, Brulin & Ellström, 2002) and is described as a growing research discipline in the Nordic countries (Aagard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006; Johannisson, Gunnarsson & Stjernberg, 2008). Central to interactive research is the ambition to include the research participants throughout the entire research process (Svensson, Ellström & Brulin, 2007), from the initial formulation of research questions to the final dissemination of research findings. This ambition is based on the assumption that researchers and research participants carry with them different kinds of knowledge that, when combined, can generate new knowledge about an issue, a problem or a phenomenon. Characteristic of interactive research is its focus on joint learning processes where scientific and lay knowledge can meet and enrich each other. Interactive research includes a critical ambition, and ideally the knowledge created in interactive research should go beyond the primary understandings of the topic or phenomenon under study that the researchers and research participants brought with them to the research process (Svensson et al., 2007).

The roles of researchers and research participants in interactive research are described as complementary and of equal importance for the research process. The research participants are understood to have inside knowledge based on their everyday relationship with the topic or phenomenon under study. This inside knowledge is expected to help in framing aims and research questions in ways that are relevant for the people and contexts studied and to provide an extra dimension in the scientific analysis. The researchers are understood to have scientific training that provides them with specific skills about research methods and analysis, the development and use of relevant concepts and theories, and dissemination of research findings (Svensson & Aagard Nielsen, 2006). This knowledge is expected to lend scientific rigour and theoretical depth to the research process (Svensson et al., 2002).

Interactive research is related to the participatory research and action research traditions (Aagard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen, 2006). Participatory research and action research are terms commonly used to describe studies that involve both researchers and research participants in the research process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Specific to interactive research is its emphasis on the creation of new knowledge and its understanding of the roles of researchers and research participants as complementary and equally important throughout the research process (Svensson et al., 2007).
The methods used in interactive research are much the same as those used in more traditional research approaches. They may however be adapted in order also to be accessible to people with little experience of research. Interactive research processes commonly also involve more traditional elements, because research can be conducted with some people as research partners and other people as research respondents. In this research project, the interactive research approach is considered to provide valuable information about young people’s lives from young people’s perspectives. So far, however, the interactive research approach seems mainly to have been conducted with adult research participants20 (see Svensson, 2006 for an exception).

**The research circle as arena for interactive research**

In this research project, the research circle (Holmstand & Härmsten, 2003; Lundberg & Starrin, 2001) is used as an arena for interactive research. The research circle is based on democratic ideals and joint explorations of a topic or phenomenon. The purpose of a research circle is to provide comprehensive knowledge about an issue and describe it from different angles. The research process in a research circle has to be grounded in the research participants’ everyday experiences. However researchers, based on their scientific knowledge, can also suggest topics and modes of inquiry. These suggestions will be treated on the same terms as the suggestions from the other participants in the research circle (Lundberg & Starrin, 2001).

In the research circle conducted in this research project, the research partners and the researchers had different roles and responsibilities. The research partners’ main responsibility was to frame the research process in ways that were relevant to young people’s lives. The researchers had two main responsibilities: to frame the research process in ways that were relevant for the scientific community, and to assist the research partners to fulfil their responsibilities by acting as trainers, consultants and mentors in the research process. As in interactive research in general, the majority of research circles seem to have been run with adult research participants (see Sundberg et al., 2006 for an exception).

---

20 A reason for this is probably that interactive research has been developed in connection with the workplace (Svensson et al., 2002).
Procedure
In the initial stages of this research project, the research process was primarily inductive – trying to explore young people’s perspectives of the concept of participation without any previous assumptions. This stage adopted an interactive research approach in which the young research partners were facilitated by two adult researchers to explore the concept of participation from their inside perspectives on young people’s lives (Study 1). The conceptualization work done by the research partners was then tested and used to inform further inquiries about perceptions and experiences of participation in school among a broader group of young people. These young people were involved as respondents in a youth survey and research partners and researchers worked together in the research circle to apply intra- and inter-generational perspectives to these young people’s perceptions and experiences of participation in school (Study 2 and Study 3). Analyses from the youth survey identified some alarming results that were used to inform further explorations of young people’s different experiences of participation in school with regard to disability and gender (Study 4). These explorations were done after the termination of the research circle, and were thus conducted from a more traditional research approach with young people as research respondents. The empirical data that is used for the explorations in Study 4 was originally collected with a broader aim and from another perspective than that in this research project. The limitations that this entails for the conclusions in this research project are further discussed in the section about transparency of the project and verification of results later on in this chapter.

Participants
Three different groups of young people (13–19 years of age) participated in this research project (Table 1). One group of young people (n=8) participated as research partners in the research circle. A second group (n=100) participated as respondents in a youth survey. A third group of young people (n=7930) participated as respondents in the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’. Those who participated as research partners in the research circle were involved in this research project for a period of six months. They have also been consulted on some occasions after the termination of the research circle. For the other two groups of participants, participation in the research project was a one-off event.
The three different groups of participants were involved in different phases of the research project. At the time of their participation, they were all enrolled in compulsory/upper-secondary schools or special/upper-secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The schools are all located in the same region of Sweden. Below, the three groups of young people who participated in this research project are described in more detail.

Table 1: Three groups of young people who participated in this research project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research circle</th>
<th>Youth survey</th>
<th>Life and Health Young People 2011&lt;sup&gt;21&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls/Boys</td>
<td>8(9&lt;sup&gt;22&lt;/sup&gt;)/0</td>
<td>61/39</td>
<td>3895/3969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One disability</td>
<td>1/-</td>
<td>12/3</td>
<td>429/509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple disabilities</td>
<td>0/-</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>108/141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No disability</td>
<td>7/-</td>
<td>45/33</td>
<td>3179/3095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Sweden</td>
<td>6/-</td>
<td>52/30</td>
<td>3486/3550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in another European country</td>
<td>0/-</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>109/103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born outside Europe</td>
<td>2/-</td>
<td>6/5</td>
<td>257/256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8(9)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7930</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There was internal loss on the items in the youth survey and the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ due to some participants not specifying their gender, disability, or country of birth.

Research partners in a research circle
The first group to be involved as participants in this research project were nine adolescent girls (15–19 years of age) who were recruited as research partners in the research circle. One inclusion criterion for the research

---

<sup>21</sup> In this research project, the frequency of disability in the data from ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ is measured with an index variable.

<sup>22</sup> The research circle started out with nine girls as research partners but one girl dropped out halfway through.
partners was that the person should be enrolled in compulsory or special school in year 9/10, or upper-secondary school or upper-secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Another inclusion criterion was that the schools that the research partners attended should be within reasonable travel distance from each other. The process of inviting young people to become research partners was initiated at the end of spring term 2008 and took the whole of fall 2009 (approx. seven months). Different strategies were used in order to increase the likelihood of reaching potential research partners. To help disseminate information about the research circle to students at various schools in the area, headmasters and teachers were contacted and requested to inform students about the research circle. At special and upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, school social workers, students serving on student councils, and school canteen personnel were also contacted.

No definite number was set for how many research partners there would be in the research circle. But a total of around ten research partners and two researchers was considered to be an appropriate number (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The first research partner (girl) to volunteer was recruited when participating in the research circle was included as an optional elective at her school. One of the researchers met up with her and explained the framework of the research circle in somewhat more detail. After the meeting, she recruited a friend (girl) to the circle. During the rest of the recruitment period, the researchers stayed in contact (both by physical meetings and by e-mail) with these first two enrolled research partners in order to keep them informed about the process of enrolling further research partners. Two more girls expressed their interest in becoming research partners after being approached by the social worker at their school. They were invited to a meeting where the researchers would explain the framework of the research circle in more detail. But before the meeting took place, one of the girls backed out. She explained that she thought participating in the research circle would encroach too much on her other spare time activities. The other girl became the third research partner to be recruited to the research circle. When one of the researchers visited a school class and personally invited young people to become research partners, both girls and boys expressed interest in joining. When they were later contacted to set up an introductory meeting, some explained that they were no longer interested or did not have time. The six

---

23 Education in compulsory schools lasts nine years, in special schools ten years.
young people who showed up at the meeting and agreed to become research partners were all girls.

Halfway through the research circle, one of the girls dropped out due to lack of time. The remaining research partners were Helin Talayhan, Mikaela Bdoaui, Elin Brandt Korall, Frida Pettersson, Hanna Jansson, Frida Boson, Frida Matthiesen, and Elin Kleber. At the time when the research circle was conducted, these eight research partners came from three different schools and two different school systems. Two were enrolled in a compulsory school. One was enrolled in an upper-secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Five were enrolled in upper-secondary school. For more information about the research partners, see Study 1.

The researchers in the research circle were Elinor Brunnberg, who acted as research leader and also has been involved in supervising this thesis, and myself as circle leader and ultimately responsible for this thesis.

The research partners participated in the research circle in their spare time, and sometimes had other activities planned at the same time as the circle meetings. Because of conflicting activities and occasional illness, the research partners’ attendance varied, but on average six girls were present at each of the circle meetings. The two researchers participating in the research circle had the different roles of circle leader (Jeanette) and as research leader (Elinor). The circle leader had the main responsibility for propelling the research circle forward while the research leader had ultimate responsibility for research ethics and quality. For more thorough descriptions of the various roles and responsibilities of the research partners, the circle leader and the research leader, see Study 1.

Respondents in a youth survey

The second group to be involved in this research project were the 100 girls and boys who responded to a youth survey conducted in the research circle. The participants in the youth survey represented the same schools and ages (15–19 years of age) as the research partners. All students who were in class the day that the youth survey was conducted are included in the survey. The external loss in the youth survey is one student who chose not to respond to the survey. The 33 students who were not in school that day are not included in the survey. Since these students are not included, they do not belong to the external loss of the youth survey. The decision to omit these students does however have consequences for the generalizations of the results in this research project, as will be discussed later on in this chapter. Of the participants in the youth survey, 91 were enrolled in
compulsory or upper-secondary schools and nine were enrolled in upper-
secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. For a more de-
tailed description of the participants in the youth survey, see Study 2.

Respondents in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’
The third group to be involved in this research project were the 7,930 girls
and boys who responded to the survey ‘Life and Health Young People
2011’. ‘Life and Health Young People’ is a regular cross-sectional survey
of all students in three age cohorts (13–18 years of age) in the same area
as this research project was carried out. ‘Life and Health Young People
2011’ was conducted by the community medicine and public health de-
partment in the region.

The response rate to ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was 81 per
cent. Included in the external loss in this research project are 37 students
whose responses were removed from the data file before the data set was
made available for analysis in this research project. It was explained that
when the questionnaires were reviewed, reviewers deemed that these stu-
dents had been mischievous when filling in the questionnaire (Persson,
2013, personal communication). The same procedure has been used in
previous ‘Life and Health Young People’ studies (Brunnberg et al., 2009).

The respondents in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ participated
anonymously and a follow-up study of those not responding to the ques-
tionnaire or whose responses were removed from the data set has not been
conducted. Among the participants in ‘Life and Health Young People
2011’, 7,842 were enrolled in compulsory or upper-secondary schools and
88 were enrolled in special or upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-
of-hearing students. Young people enrolled in compulsory or upper-
secondary schools for students with learning disabilities were not included
in the survey. For a more detailed description of the participants in ‘Life
and Health Young People 2011’, see Study 4.

Methods and analyses
An overview of the various methods for data collection and analysis used
in this research project, together with the empirical data that forms the
basis for studies 1–4, is provided in Table 2. The empirical data comes
from three different data sets, compiled in the research circle, in the youth
survey, and in the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’, respective-
ly. The first data set includes the research partners’ self-reported data from
the initial phases of the research circle. This data set includes unstructured
(text, photos) data. The second data set includes the responses from the students who participated in the youth survey. This data set consists of both unstructured (text) and structured (nominal/ordinal) data. The third data set includes the responses from the students who participated in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’. This data set consists of structured (nominal/ordinal) data.

Table 2: Methods, empirical data and types of analysis used in the research project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research circle</th>
<th>Youth survey</th>
<th>Life and Health Young People 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>focus groups with creative elements</td>
<td>semi-structured survey questionnaires</td>
<td>structured survey questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical data</td>
<td>unstructured data (text, photos)</td>
<td>unstructured data (text), structured data (nominal/ordinal)</td>
<td>structured data (nominal/ordinal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of analysis</td>
<td>abstractions, categorizations</td>
<td>descriptive analysis, frequency tables, cross tabulation, bivariate analysis</td>
<td>multiple correspondence analysis, bivariate analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The research project has a mixed methods design and the four empirical studies build on both unstructured and structured data. The empirical data used in this research project were collected both with young people as research partners in a research circle and with young people as respondents in the two different survey studies: a youth survey and ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’.

The analyses in this research project were performed both to provide in-depth knowledge about how young people perceive participation in school and to search for general patterns of participation among various groups of young people. Below, the methods used to compile and analyse the data in the various data sets are described.
Methods and analysis in the research circle

In the research circle, focus groups with creative elements were used to collect research partners’ self-reported data about their perceptions of the concept of participation in school. The creative elements in the focus groups were ‘PI-interviews’ (Brunnberg, 2013) and photos. The idea behind using creative elements in this research was to facilitate research partners’ critical reflections about participation in school by working with contrasts, and hopefully to define some boundaries between participation and non-participation. The PI-interviews were introduced to the research partners at the first meeting of the research circle, and were described as a way to start thinking about various meanings of the concept of participation in school. Each research partner was asked to write keywords that described participation and non-participation on two different sets of 5 x 5 cm memo notes. The circle leader then facilitated a roundabout presentation based on the memo notes, where each of the research partners explained to the others what she thought constituted participation and non-participation in school. During the first meeting, the researchers also handed out disposable cameras to the research partners. The cameras were presented as providing an additional means to start thinking about various meanings of participation in school. The research partners were told that using the camera was voluntary. They were also told that if they would like to take a photo of a peer, a teacher or any other person, they would have to ask that person for permission before taking the photo. The research partners were also informed that the quality of the execution of the shot was of minor importance. This information was added when some of the research partners expressed concern that they did not consider themselves good photographers. One of the research partners declared that she did not intend to take any photos and thus did not take any camera. Of the remaining research partners, two never used their camera and later explained that they had forgotten about it or had not found any opportunity to use it.

Before the next meeting of the research circle, the researchers developed the research partners’ photos. The number of exposed pictures in the cameras varied from zero to five. During the meeting, the research partners

---

24 The research circle was conducted in 2010. If the research circle was to be conducted today, it would probably be more suitable to provide research partners with the opportunity to upload photos from their smart phones to a web page accessible only to the participants in the research circle.
worked with the developed photos in a similar way as they had worked with the PI-interviews. The researchers facilitated the discussion by encouraging the person who took each photo to explain to the others why she had taken the photo, what she had felt when she was confronted by the situation that made her take the photo, and what aspects of participation and non-participation she had wanted to illustrate by taking the photo. After this meeting, the researchers in the research circle initiated a categorization of the various ways that participation was described in the memo notes and photos produced by the research partners.

The researchers suggested categorizations of the research partners’ memo notes and photos. These comprised eight themes: activity, fellowship, needs, feelings, energy, respect, consideration, power, and desire. When these themes were presented to the research partners, the research partners identified a difference within these themes between social relations with peers and educational relations with teachers. This difference had not been recognized by the researchers. The research partners then tried out various ways of arranging memo-notes, photos and themes. When the research partners were satisfied with their categorization, four dimensions of participation had been identified. These dimensions were named by the research partners after what form of participation they described: social participation, desire to learn, joint decision-making, and communication.

The research process in the research circle was documented by tape recordings, meeting minutes, and in research partners’ written reflections about their participation. This documentation forms the basis for Study 1 and the development of a model of an interactive research circle with young people as research partners. The dimensions of participation identified by the research partners served as inspiration for the formulation of a youth survey described below.

**Methods and analysis in the youth survey**

In the youth survey a semi-structured questionnaire was constructed and used to explore students’ perceptions and experiences of participation in school. The questionnaire included closed-ended items with fixed response alternatives, items that asked the respondents to describe their perceptions and experiences of participation in specific situations in school, and items that asked the respondents to describe their understandings of participation in school in general. The choice of a semi-structured questionnaire as data collection method in the youth survey was based on the research
partners’ preferences. When presented with various alternative methods, the research partners chose the questionnaire as the primary data collection method and thematic interviews as a complementary method. The research partners explained that these methods would be preferred by young people as they provided a certain amount of privacy (survey questionnaire) as well as intimacy (interviews). The research partners also seemed to think that these two research methods would be considered as reliable research methods by other young people. They told the researchers that they did not want to use any creative elements for collection of data since they did not think that such methods would be considered by other young people to have high scientific quality.

The survey questionnaire and interview guide were created and piloted by the research partners among students in the relevant ages. Comments from these test rounds were fed back into the research circle, leading to some minor adjustments of the instruments. Due to ethical restrictions as well as time limitations, only the survey questionnaire was used in the youth survey. The ethical restrictions originate in an application for ethical vetting of this research project submitted by the researchers to the regional ethical review board in Uppsala, Sweden, before inviting young people to become research partners. The board approved forming a research circle with young people as research partners on the condition that all data collected by the research circle would be anonymous. When the researchers requested the possibility to make an amendment to the ethical application considering the research partners’ wish to use interviews as a complementary method, the ethical review board judged that this would require a new application for ethical vetting. The board’s decision was taken back to the research partners and discussed at one of the meetings of the research circle. The research circle was faced with the choice of suspending all other activities for a couple of weeks in order to write a new application for ethical vetting or letting go of the interviews for the time being. After some consideration, the research partners chose to continue with only the questionnaire. This decision was influenced by the fact that the research circle was scheduled to end before the summer holiday, and some of the research partners would graduate from upper-secondary school and were unsure whether they would still be in town for the next semester.

The youth survey was analysed both from the research partners’ intragenerational perspectives and from the researchers’ intergenerational perspectives. The research partners’ analyses were initiated at a full-day workshop during spring break and continued over four circle meetings.
During this analytical workshop the research partners were introduced to descriptive analysis (Brunnberg, 2007). Hands on training was provided as the researchers initiated a joint analysis of one of the open-ended items in the youth survey. The researchers then acted as facilitators and consultants in the research partners’ analyses. The research partners worked in pairs or groups of three with the analysis of the youth survey, dividing the various items between them. For the open-ended items, the research partners were provided with various coloured pens and instructed to code the responses to an item such that those responses that described similar aspects of participation had the same colour. When a group had finished colour coding and categorizing an item they wrote short texts that summarized the categories identified in that item. The coding and the summary done by a group of research partners were then discussed with another group to find possible alternative interpretations of the responses to an item. The summaries written by the research partners make up the research partners’ intra-generational analyses of the open-ended items in the youth survey. For descriptions of the research partners’ analyses of the closed-ended items in the youth survey, see Study 2. For descriptions of the researchers’ inter-generational analyses of the youth survey, see Study 2 and Study 3.

The intra- and inter-generational analyses in the youth survey identified some worrying results concerning participation in school for the participants with disabilities. In order to contextualize and further explore these results, the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was used to make inquiries among a broader group of young people. The way the analyses of ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ were performed in this study is described below. Before that, however, a short digression about the research circle’s attempts to include teachers in the youth survey will be provided.

In parallel with the construction of the student questionnaire in the youth survey, the research circle also created a version of the questionnaire intended for teachers. The decision to include teachers in the youth survey was based on the research partners’ observation that students and teachers are part of each other’s work environments. The research partners therefore wanted to explore teachers’ perceptions about young people’s participation in school and whether the possibility for teachers to provide participatory opportunities was affected by the students’ attitudes.

The teachers’ version of the youth survey was presented by one of the researchers to about sixty teachers at two of the schools that the research partners were enrolled in. Of the approached teachers, thirty agreed to
receive a questionnaire. The teachers did not however want to complete the questionnaire on site and were therefore instructed to mail it to the researchers once they were finished. Only three teacher questionnaires were returned. An extended data collection phase where more teachers could have been invited to take part in the survey would probably have resulted in more completed teacher questionnaires. The strict time limitation of the research circle agreed upon by the research partners however did not allow for a renewed data collection among teachers. In the research circle, the research partners decided to continue with analyses of the student questionnaires only, and no further analysis of the teacher survey is reported in this thesis.

Methods and analysis of ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’

The survey ‘Life and Health Young People’ is a regular25 cross sectional survey and the data for ‘Life and Health Young People’ is collected with a structured questionnaire. The 2011 questionnaire comprised 87 questions and seven of these that are about participation in school were selected for analysis in this research project. The selection of items on participation from ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was inspired by the way young people described participation in the youth survey. For more detailed descriptions of the selection of participatory variables from ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ in this research project, see Study 4.

The questions about participation in school in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ are the same as those in the previous survey from 2009. In ‘Life and Health Young People 2009’ the researchers in the research circle were able to go through the questionnaire and add a question about support in school. This review of the ‘Life and Health Young People 2009’ questionnaire was conducted in the initial phase of this research project. The reason was that at that time it had been established that this thesis would focus on young people’s participation in school and that inquiries among young people about participation in school would be performed together with young people as research partners. Without knowing the specific focus of these inquiries (as they were to be determined together with the research partners in the research circle), the ‘Life and Health Young People’ questionnaire was reviewed with the ambition to make

25 ‘Life and Health Young People’ has previously been conducted in 2005, 2007 and 2009 in the same region. The next survey in the region is planned for autumn 2014.
subsequent comparisons between explorations of participation conducted from young people’s perspectives and from adults’ perspectives. The questionnaire in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’, which is used for analyses in this research project, is the same as the 2009 questionnaire.

In analysing ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’, disability and gender were assumed to be potentially important identity markers that influence young people’s opportunities for participation. This assumption was based on the results from the youth survey conducted in the research circle. In analysing ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’, the variable disability consists of the three categories ‘no disability’, ‘one disability’ and ‘multiple disabilities’ and was measured with an index consisting of the following six questions:

- Do you have a hearing impairment?
- Do you have a visual impairment not correctable with glasses or lenses?
- Do you have a motor impairment?
- Do you have reading difficulties, writing difficulties, or dyslexia?
- Do you have ADHD or ADD?
- Do you have another disability than the above mentioned?

The data in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was analysed though multiple correspondence analysis and bivariate analysis. These analyses are further described in Study 4.

Transparency of the project and verification of results
Various criteria have been suggested for discussing the quality of a study (cf. Bryman, Becker & Sempic, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 2004). In this section, the research project is discussed in relation to four aspects of quality. Ethical considerations are included in this section because ethical awareness is described as an important part of research methodologies involving children and young people (Alderson, 2004; Punch, 2002). Reflections about validity and research ethics are also included in each of the empirical studies.

Transparency
Transparency is here understood as an indicator of whether the research has been described in such way that the process, results and conclusions can be audited (Bryman et al., 2008; Flick, 2007). The empirical studies in
this research project follow successively after one other and each study is informed by the previous one. The project was initiated with a research circle in which four dimensions of participation were identified from young people’s perspectives. These dimensions were tested and explored in a youth survey that was analysed from both intra- and inter-generational perspectives. The results from the analyses in the youth survey informed inquiries about young people’s participation in the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’. A guiding principle in the research project has been to be as clear as possible about how the various studies have fed into each other. When relevant, tables are provided that illustrate the connections between the empirical studies (Studies 1, 2 and 4).

In line with this ambition of transparency, the results in the empirical studies are often followed by quotations from the young people or by frequency tables and illustrations of statistical analyses. Another explicit ambition in this research project has been to be as clear as possible about the young research partners’ contributions, both in the conceptualization and the analysis phases of research. The distinction between intra- and inter-generational analyses in the youth survey (Study 2) helped in identifying differences in young people’s and adults’ perspectives on participation in school. Descriptions, results and conclusions from the interactive elements of this research project have been audited by the research partners who have read and commented on these works. The text has then been modified according to their suggestions.

**Use of various approaches, methods and empirical sources**

Various research approaches, methods, and empirical sources have been used in this research project. This is in line with the mixed methods design concept, where diverse approaches and methods are considered to give a richer understanding of the topic under study (Bryman et al., 2008; Fielding, 2012). The mix of interactive and more traditional research approaches made it possible to compare and combine two generations’ perspectives on young people’s participation in school. The intra- and inter-generational analyses in the youth survey complemented each other since they described young people’s participation in school at both a particular and a more general level. The survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was conducted from an adult perspective and provides a somewhat different viewpoint on participation in school. The inquiries in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ are informed by the results from the youth survey. Since the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey was conducted with
a different aim, focus and perspective than the youth survey, there is no perfect match between the participatory dimensions in the youth survey and the participatory variables in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’. This combination of different perspectives and empirical sources is consistent with the viewpoint of this research project that children’s, young people’s and adults’ perspectives provide complementary insights on children and young people’s life situation (Sommer et al., 2010). It is also in line with the project’s mixed methods design.

The various methods used in this research project made it possible to generate more comprehensive knowledge about participation. In the focus groups with creative elements (Study 1) the PI-interviews and photos provided somewhat different information. The dimension of decision-making, for example, was only described in the PI-interviews, and the dimension of communication was identified from two photos taken by one of the research partners (Study 2). The use of a semi-structured questionnaire in the youth survey made it possible to test the various participatory dimensions with a larger group of young people and at the same time collect material about their experiences with these aspects of participation.

The open-ended items in the questionnaire used in the youth survey provided empirical data about how the respondents perceived the concept of participation in school and its various dimensions. For example, this empirical source led to the understanding that communication was a central dimension of young people’s participation in school, and was not primarily about hearing and not hearing (Study 2). The closed-ended items provided empirical data about the respondents’ experiences of participation in school. Although the sample size in the youth survey did not allow for any extensive statistical analysis, this empirical source did make it possible to identify some tendencies, for example concerning lower participation in school among students with disabilities than among students with no disabilities. The use of the total survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ made it possible to identify patterns of participation and exposure to bullying and threats among young people. It also made it possible to identify a potential structural discrimination of students with multiple disabilities, as opposed to students with one disability and with no disabilities. The use of a structured total survey made it possible to run intersectional analyses (McCall, 2005) that combined the variables disability and gender to account for different experiences among girls and boys with disabilities.
Transferability and sampling
Transferability is here understood as the degree to which the results of this research project are applicable to other contexts and other groups of young people (Hellström, 2008). To increase the transferability of results, specific efforts were made to include young people with different living conditions. When inviting research partners to the research circle, schools were contacted in diverse socio-economic areas, with different orientations (academic and vocational), and belonging to different school systems (compulsory/upper-secondary schools and special/upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students). Efforts were made to reach students in special schools since these students have been identified as a group with limited participation in research about young people’s participation (Bagga-Gupta, 2006). These efforts included holding a meeting with the headmasters of the special school and the upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, informing personnel at a youth café popular among deaf and hard-of-hearing young people about the research circle, and asking social workers at upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students to inform the students about the research circle. This enabled a larger group of young people to be reached by the information than would have been possible if only one invitation strategy had been used.

The fact that the invitation strategies only seem to have attracted girls can be argued to limit the transferability of the results in this research project. The absence of boys as research partners means that the youth survey was conducted from a feminine perspective. Before being implemented, however, the youth survey was piloted among both girls and boys. The design of the survey also provided the responding boys with an opportunity to give their perspectives on the concept of participation in school. This makes the results in the youth survey also relevant for boys’ perceptions and experiences of participation in school (Study 2). The ‘Life and Health Young People’ survey has been modified in various ways to include more groups of students. For example, the questionnaire was provided on different coloured paper and with a larger font size to increase its accessibility for students with special needs. In ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ the questionnaire was also provided in sign language for the first time, providing signing young people with the opportunity to read and respond to the questionnaire in their first language. The sign language version was developed because students in special schools had been identi-
fied as a group with a low response rate in earlier ‘Life and Health Young People’ surveys (Brunnberg et al, 2009).

User-friendly methods
Providing the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey in a sign language version is one example of how the methods in this research project were applied in a ‘user friendly’ way. In research with children and young people, researchers often emphasize the importance of applying methods that are relevant from children and young people’s perspectives (Eurochild, 2012; O’Kane, 2000). Some researchers have referred to this as using ‘child friendly’ methods (Kellett, 2011; Molina, Molina, Tanner & Seballos, 2009). In this research project the term ‘user friendly’ seems to be a more relevant description of the methods used (see also Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). In this project, creative elements were found to be useful when exploring the concept of participation from young people’s perspectives, because the research partners were not limited by their verbal skills when exploring new territories. They were also useful for levelling the ground between the researchers’ scientific knowledge and the research partners’ experiential knowledge about young people’s participation in school. The decision to use a semi-structured survey questionnaire in the youth survey was based on the research partners’ intra-generational perspective on what data collection method would be preferred by young people. They explained to the researchers that surveys were viewed by young people as robust and scientific research methods. This is also in line with other research (Tisdall et al., 2009.) where young people have described preferring surveys to other data collection methods because surveys provide them with a greater sense of anonymity.

Limitations of sampling
Both the youth survey and the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey had high response rates. The results in this research project are thus representative of the young people who were in school the day the surveys were conducted. When interpreting the results in this research project, it is nevertheless important to be aware of some limitations in the sampling. The young people who were absent on the days when the surveys were conducted are not included, and the surveys have not been implemented in special schools for students with learning disabilities. Some of the studies included in the previous chapter about the research field are about student participation in such schools (Molin, 2004; Nordström, 2002; Szönyi,
These studies formed a referential framework for this research project but including young people attending special schools for students with learning disabilities in this research project might have revealed some additional dimensions and aspects of participation in school. As for those students who were absent when the youth survey and ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ were conducted, there are many possible reasons why they were not at the data collection sites. At one of the data collection sites for the youth survey, for example, the teachers explained that some of the students were away at another school activity. It is likely that some of the young people who were absent those days were sick or just could not make it to school that day. It is however significant for the transferability of the results in this research project that the group of young people who were absent also includes those who chose not to go to school the day the survey was conducted. Among this group of young people are probably some individuals who prefer to participate in other contexts than school (Molin, 2004) and some individuals who are afraid of going to school due to harassment, violence and threats from peers and adults in school.

In the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey some students did not answer the question whether they had a disability. The ‘Life and Health’ surveys are anonymous, and it is not possible to track how individual students have answered the questionnaires. It is however possible to identify schools and, as described in Study 4, there was also a quite high non-response rate on the question about disability among the young people in special schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. It is not possible to identify how many of the young people with disabilities enrolled in compulsory and upper-secondary schools did not answer the question about disability. The external and internal non-response rates in this research project are discussed in Studies 2, 3 and 4. This is not unique to this research project (Brunnberg et al., 2009) but needs to be recognized when interpreting the results and assessing their transferability to other groups of young people.

**Ethical considerations**

This research project was submitted for vetting by the Regional Ethical Review Board (Registration number: Dnr 2009/262). The Review Board approved the research circle as well as the youth survey. The survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ was deemed by the Regional Ethical Review Board not to fall under the law for ethical vetting (Registration number: Dnr 2010/406). The reason for this was that it did not involve
handling of data which could be tied to a particular person. Specific ethical considerations that are discussed in the following are informed and voluntary participation, a dynamic consent procedure for young people as research partners, confidentiality, and utility (Alderson, 2004; Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Additional ethical considerations that are discussed in the empirical studies concern the inclusion of young people as research partners, and have to do with providing space for young people to develop their capacities, creating inclusive research settings, promoting the best interest of young people, and facilitating relevant participation of young people in research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Fleming, 2011; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998).

All the young people included in this research project participated on a voluntary basis. Both in the youth survey and in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ the participants were informed about the purpose of the surveys ahead of time. In ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ this information was provided by the teachers who were responsible for handing out the questionnaires to the students. This is the same procedure as has been used during the previous surveys in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (Brunnberg et al., 2009; Brunnberg et al., 2007). In the youth survey the participants were informed by the research partners about the purpose of the study and told that there would be no negative consequences for their grades if they did not participate in the survey. A difference between the information provided in the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey and that in the youth survey is that the former was written by adults for young people while the latter was written by young people for young people. Another difference is that only in the youth survey is information included about the lack of negative consequences for students’ grades if they do not participate. This was described by the research partners as important when informing young people that their participation in the youth survey was voluntary. The participants in both the youth survey and in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ were considered to be capable of giving informed consent to participating in the research project (Balen et al., 2006; Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999).

For the young people who participated in the research circle, informed consent was treated as a process rather than a one-off event. This has been described by childhood researchers as the most ethical approach when doing research with children and young people (Alderson, 2004). In the research circle it was important to treat consent as a dynamic concept by continuously providing the option to continue participating, cease partici-
participating, or participate to a lesser extent during the various stages and activities of the research process. Some of the research partners, for example, opted out of using the cameras offered as a way to start thinking about participation in school. Others did not want to take part in conference presentations about the youth survey.

Both the youth survey and the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey are anonymous in the sense that they are not coded and do not provide a systematic way to track individual respondents. The research partners in the youth survey, however, did identify some narrative responses that could be tied to a specific person. These responses were removed before the results were distributed to young people, teachers, and relevant professions. The young people who participated as research partners were able to choose whether to participate under a pseudonym or their real name.

The participants in the research circle and the youth survey were informed about the specific focus of this research project, and the empirical data has been used accordingly. The participants in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ were informed that their answers would be used to describe young people’s living conditions, habits, and health. They were also informed that through their participation they would be helping to provide a picture of young people’s situation. The use of the empirical data from ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ in this research project is considered to be consistent with that information.
Summaries of the empirical studies

In this chapter, the results from the four empirical studies are summarized.

Study 1:
Young people as partners in research: experiences from an interactive research circle with adolescent girls

This study is about the development of an interactive research methodology for young people’s participation in research. The creation of a model of an interactive research circle, based on the Scandinavian study-circle tradition with democratic ideals of equality and respect, is described. Participants in the research circle were eight adolescent girls (15–19 years of age) who served as research partners and two academic researchers. The interactive process in the research circle concerns research fundamentals: developing methodological knowledge, designing a study, how to formulate the research questions from the viewpoint of young people, how to analyse data from a generational insider perspective, and how to handle power relations between adults and young people in joint learning processes. Focus groups with creative elements (Brunnberg, 2013) are used in the study to formulate research questions from young people’s perspectives. Harry Shier’s (2001) ‘rights-based participatory model’ and elements of Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘theory of social development’ are used as valuable tools for analysing young people’s participation in the research process.

The study describes how young people’s participation was an integral part of the research process and how the asymmetrical power relationship between adults and young people made asymmetric responsibility and respect into central parts of the methodology. The asymmetric responsibility meant that the researchers were responsible both for the research process and for facilitating the research partners’ participation in the research process. This is in line with how other studies in childhood research describe the importance of combining promotion of young people’s participation with appropriate support to help them participate on their own terms (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Trondman, 2003). Results from the study show how the young people contributed to the research process by identifying generation-relevant concepts and research questions. They also describe how young people needed much support in order to understand that their knowledge was valuable to adults and to the research process.
An important part of the methodology was to challenge the research partners’ perception of knowledge as an individual project and to emphasize the joint learning process where both the researchers’ and the research partners’ perspectives were valuable. Capacity building, increased social networks, and being listened to in a high-status adult arena were identified by research partners as important personal outcomes of their participation in the research circle. The results also show how the use of non-verbal methods can be an important alternative for the identification of central aspects of participation from young people’s perspectives. A barrier to young people’s participation in research is described to be young people’s lack of control over their own time and the influence this has on their ability to plan for the future. Another barrier that is identified is how the dynamics of interactive methodologies can challenge the traditional organization of ethical vetting procedures.

Conclusions of the study relevant for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation are that participation in intergenerational social learning processes must be seen as both a process and an outcome, that children and young people are capable of providing important information in such processes, and that asymmetric responsibility is important in providing children and young people with appropriate support to participate on their own terms.

Study 2:

*Intra- and inter-generational perspectives on youth participation in Sweden: a study with young people as research partners*

This study describes a youth survey about young people’s participation that was conducted by eight young research partners in a research circle with other young people as respondents (n = 100). The research respondents were in the same age group as the research partners (15–19 years of age). The aim of this study is to explore young people’s experiences of participation in school with a methodology designed to combine and compare intra- and inter-generational perspectives. Research questions concern whether, and if so how intra-generational perspectives will generate new knowledge about young people’s participation that is different from knowledge generated from inter-generational perspectives. The method used in the study is a questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended items. The questionnaire was created and implemented by the young research partners in order to collect data about young people’s
perceptions and experiences of participation in school. In this study, participation is explored as a multi-dimensional concept comprising social, educational, democratic, and communicative dimensions.

The results of the research partners’ intra-generational analyses show that the young people in the survey perceive participation as a complex area that includes dimensions of accessibility in communication and education; having friends; and being able to exert influence. In all these dimensions, participation arises in the form of an interplay between young people’s ability to enact their agency and adults’ ability to provide participatory opportunities. In the research partners’ analyses, participation is described to be important for young people. Gender and disability seem to impact on young people’s experiences of participation. The research partners’ findings are described as being close to the respondents’ empirical reality in school. Two specific contributions are the identification of communication and understanding as important aspects of participation in both intra- and inter-generational relations, and the identification of responsibility as a key part of young people’s participation in school. The adult academic researchers supplemented the intra-generational analyses made by the research partners by adding statistical and theoretical interpretations. In these analyses supportive relations, agency, and various barriers to participation are identified as important characteristics of young people’s participation in school. Disability is not controlled for in the inter-generational analyses. Two specific contributions of the researchers’ analyses are the finding that various dimensions of participation can vary in importance in different situations in school and the finding that good student-teacher relations in school require that teachers support and facilitate students to take responsibility themselves.

Based on the results from the youth survey in this study, the following definition of participation from the perspective of young people is proposed: Participation is involvement in a life situation in a free communicative context with the possibility to take responsibility and the agency to contribute to interaction and decision making. This definition is inspired by the World Health Organization’s (2007) definition of participation as ‘involvement in a life situation’ (p. 9) but also includes communication and responsibility that the young people in this study identified as important aspects of participation in school.

Conclusions in this study relevant for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation are that young people’s opportunities and abilities to communicate are critical to their
participation and that adults must provide young people with appropriate support to take responsibility themselves.

Study 3:

*A model of participation in school life*

This study describes a model of young people’s perspectives on participation in school life that is based on intra- and inter-generational analyses of a youth survey conducted by young people as research partners in a research circle. The model illustrates how participation in school life, from young people’s perspectives, is created in the dimensions of social participation, joint decision-making, and desire to learn. Common to all these dimensions is communication, which serves as an essential form of participation that conditions all other forms of participation. Participation is described as created in vertical relations with adults and in horizontal relations with peers. The model includes the concepts of duty, rights and responsibilities, which are various ways that the young people can understand their participation in school depending on the nature of the relationships in which it is created. The model also accounts for the powerful position of adults in school in relation to young people.

This study describes how the various dimensions of participation in school life are interrelated and how participation in one dimension can spur or hinder participation in another dimension. This is in line with other studies about young people’s participation in school (Molin, 2004; Szönyi & Söderqvist Dunkers, 2012). But the model also includes features of participation that seem to be less well described in research about children and young people’s participation in school. One such feature is how communication skills and shared communicative arenas appear in the model as fundamental requirements for young people’s participation in school life. Communication is a double-edged sword, however, as it can also be used to bully young people and exclude them from the participatory dimensions. Another feature of the model that seems less well described in research about children and young people’s participation in school is how participation is described as a right, a duty and/or a responsibility depending on what participatory dimension and in what kind of relationship in which participation is created.

Implications of the study relevant for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation are that, from young people’s perspectives, participation is a concept that includes social,
educational and decision-making contexts in school, and that greater awareness is needed among adults and young people about how to use communication in ways that are inclusive and treat young people as individuals with dignity, integrity and responsibilities towards each other and towards adults in school.

**Study 4:**

*Participation and exposure to bullying and threats in school: young people with multiple disabilities at greater risk*

This study is about participation and exposure to bullying and threats in school among students with disabilities. The study is inspired and informed by a youth survey that young people as research partners conducted with other young people about participation in school. The aim is to explore complex experiences of participation among girls and boys with multiple disabilities, as compared to girls and boys with one disability or with no disabilities. The study is based on the survey ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ which includes the responses from 7930 students in compulsory and upper-secondary schools as well as special school and upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. ‘Life and Health Young People’ is a regular cross-sectional survey of all young people in three age cohorts (13–18) in the same area as the youth survey was conducted in 2010.

Seven questions from ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ are selected and analysed in this study. Participation is measured by eleven variables divided into the themes connectedness, influence, engagement, teacher support, and exposure to bullying and threats. To describe participation among girls and boys, these variables are analysed with an index variable of disability with the three variable categories: multiple disabilities (i.e. having two or more disabilities); one disability; and no disabilities.

The results show that students with more than one disability have a higher risk of negative experiences of participation in school such as bullying and threats than the students with one or no disability. Bullying or threats can come from students or from teachers and other adults in school. The girls and boys with no disabilities have more friends, are more protected from bullying and threats, and experience more influence, school satisfaction and strong teacher support than the girls and boys with disabilities, especially those with multiple disabilities. The students with one disability describe similar experiences of school satisfaction, interest in
school, and influence as the student with no disabilities. They do however have other experiences of bullying and threats in school than the students with no disability. The results also indicate that having a disability, and especially having more than one disability, is more negative for the experience of participation in school among girls than among boys.

Conclusions of the study relevant for professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation are that students with disabilities and especially students with multiple disabilities need more support to participate on equal terms as other students. Girls and boys with disabilities may have unequal opportunities for participation in school.
Concluding discussion

In this final chapter important results of the research project will be highlighted and discussed. The aim of this thesis was to explore young people’s perspectives on and experiences of participation in school. The aim encompassed both a methodological purpose, to design a research process that included young people in the research process, and a substantial purpose, to find out more about young people’s participation from both intra- and inter-generational perspectives. Four research questions have been discussed and answered in four empirical studies. The following are some of the most central results in this research project.

A methodology of an interactive research circle

The first research question, which was answered in Study 1, concerned how young people can be involved in research in order to explore young people’s participation. The development of an interactive research circle based on democratic ideals is an important result of this research project. The research circle was conducted as a twin process, both developing and testing ways to do research together with young people. Fundamental values in the research circle were everyone’s right to be treated with respect; everyone’s right to have one’s voice heard and considered; and everyone being a valuable member of the group. It was explicitly explained to the research partners that their contributions were just as important as those of the academic researchers. It was also emphasized that the roles of research partners and academic researchers were complementary.

The fundamental values were also accompanied by some specific duties of the participants in the research circle. These were to treat other members with respect, to listen to each other, and to value each other’s contributions. The research circle is based on the Scandinavian tradition of the study circle, with its democratic ideals of equality and respect. In the discussions in the research circle, everyone’s opinions were taken into consideration and respected as equally valuable. Everyone was free to contribute to the joint discussions. It was a principle in these discussions to listen to each other and not interrupt the one who was speaking. All research partners took part in these discussions but to varying degrees. Some were outspoken and used more of the shared space for talking, while others preferred to listen and used the space for talking more sparingly. The possibility for the research partners to choose how they wanted to participate in the discussions in the research circle is in line with other studies that de-
scribe how young people prefer diverse forms of participation (Johnson, 2014; see also Lewis, 2010).

Another important result of this project is the identification of asymmetric responsibility as a central aspect of research processes where young people are involved as research partners together with academic researchers. In this project, asymmetric responsibility meant that the academic researchers and the young research partners had different roles and had different expectations placed on them in the research process. The research partners were responsible for providing experience-based and intra-generational perspectives on participation in school. The academic researchers were responsible for providing scientific and inter-generational perspectives on participation in school. In addition to this, the academic researchers were also responsible for helping the young research partners to fulfill their roles and meet the expectations placed on them as research partners. The application of asymmetric responsibility in the research circle provided the research partners with better opportunities to participate on equal terms with the academic researchers. It also accounted for how the young research partners’ needed continuous support from the academic researchers to remain confident about their capacities and expertise in settings together with adults.

**Creative methods, scaffolding, and challenging intra-generational power relations**

The second research question, which was answered in Study 1 and Study 2, was how can young people apply their perspectives in research settings together with adults. The results show that creative methods can serve as valuable alternative modes of communication in research with young people. Academic researchers often have many years’ experience of talking and expressing their ideas verbally. Researchers are also trained to critically reflect on abstract concepts in ways that research partners might not be. When working with research partners without former experience of academic research, the academic researchers’ training and experience can create a power imbalance that makes it difficult for research partners to apply their perspectives. The results of this project show that creative methods make it possible to discuss aspects of participation that young people consider important but that they have not yet concretized in their thoughts or that they lack the words to describe.

Another important result of this research project is how sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) about scaffolding is useful for helping young
people to apply their perspectives in research with academic researchers. In this research project, scaffolding provided a way to understand and account for the dynamic interplay between the roles of research partners and academic researchers. At various stages in the research process, the academic researchers and the research partners took on the roles of experts, educators, and learners.

The researchers’ experiences in this research project is that academic researchers also need to challenge intra-generational power relations between young research partners. A crucial principle that was identified in this research project was the principle of allowing oneself and others to change their minds. This principle was included as a clause in the code of behavior that was jointly drafted and signed by the participants in the research circle. The research partners later related that this principle had greatly contributed to their sense of security and confidence among their peers in the research circle.

**Communication, responsibility, and adults as partners in young people’s participation**

The third research question, which was answered in Study 2 and Study 3, was about identifying important aspects of participation in school from intra- and inter-generational perspectives. Communication is here identified as a central dimension of participation. As such, it pervades and conditions young people’s participation in social, educational and decision-making dimensions of school. The results show that communication can be used in ways that are including or excluding. For example, communication can be used to expose young people to bullying and threats. Two aspects emerged in relation to participation, communication, and students with multiple disabilities that is disturbing for the situation for students with communicative disabilities. One is that the majority of students with multiple disabilities were enrolled in main-stream education (compulsory or upper-secondary schools). The other is that the most common combination of disabilities among respondents with multiple disabilities was hearing disability together with reading- and writing difficulties. Together these aspects imply that a majority of the students with multiple disabilities have difficulty understanding and making themselves understood in the three most frequent forms of communication in their everyday school life, namely spoken language, writing and reading.

The results of this research project also show that young people connect participation with responsibility. The young people describe how partici-
Participation is about being able to take responsibility and contribute to interactions and decision-making in school. This is consistent with the view of young people as social actors and as contributors to relationships and to society as described in the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2003; James, 2009). A specific finding in this project is that the connection young people make between participation and responsibility sometimes leads them to prefer non-participation or lower levels of participation in school.

Adults are identified in this research project as important partners in young people’s participation. The results show that adults need to assist and enable young people to take personal responsibility. Such support requires however individual assessments, since young people are likely to require different forms and degrees of support. Adults in school are also important partners in young people’s participation in the sense that they can contribute to an inclusive, respectful, and accepting climate in school.

The results show some differences between intra- and inter-generational perspectives of participation in school. In the research partners’ intra-generational analysis, responsibility, communication, and learning were identified as important aspects and dimensions of young people’s participation. In the academic researchers’ inter-generational analysis, power relations between young people and adults in school and the important role of adults as partners in young people’s participation were identified as important aspects of young people’s participation.

Girls and boys with multiple disabilities – a vulnerable group
The fourth and final research question, which was answered in Study 4, in this research project, was about differences in young people’s experiences in school when disability and gender are considered. The results show how students with multiple disabilities have a greater risk of low participation in school. Students with one disability have a more similar participation pattern to students with no disabilities. They are however more exposed to bullying and threats than students with no disabilities. Students with multiple disabilities are identified in this research project as belonging to a vulnerable group in terms of more negative experiences of participation, and more exposure to bullying and threats than students with one disability or with no disabilities. The results also indicate that having multiple disabilities has a more pervasive effect on girls than on boys in school. Girls with multiple disabilities are found to be in an extra vulnerable situation in school.
Special strategies were used to reach young people with disabilities, in particular young people in special schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Among these strategies was to provide additional information about the research circle to headmasters, school councils and school social workers at upper-secondary special schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Another was to make communicative adaptations of the ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ survey, for example into a sign-language version. One result of these strategies was that a student from an upper-secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students volunteered to become a research partner. The remaining research partners came from mainstream schools despite considerably fewer strategies being used to reach out to these students. Many of the respondents to ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ from special school and upper-secondary schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing students used the sign language version of the questionnaire. However, as with the previous ‘Life and Health Young People’ surveys, there was a disproportionate amount of students that did not participate among the students in special school and upper-secondary school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’. The researchers also found that there appeared to be a quite large non-response rate to the questions about disability by the participants in these schools. The results in this study show how young people with communicative disabilities belong to a group of students whose exposed and vulnerable situation needs to be made visible to professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation and well-being. Specific events experienced by the researchers show however that even when special strategies are employed, students with communicative disabilities can be hard to reach.

Conclusions

Central conclusions of this research project are that young people’s perspectives contribute new knowledge about participation in school, and that professionals and researchers committed to children and young people’s participation need to understand participation as including communicative, social, educational and decision-making dimensions. A focus on only one or two of these dimensions risks missing out on how the various dimensions of young people’s participation are intimately connected.

Both young people and adults need training and capacity building in how to communicate in ways that are inclusive, that avoid communicative breakdowns, and that do not put young people in vulnerable situations. In
such initiatives, young people, and especially girls and boys with communicative disabilities, like hearing impairment and reading and writing difficulties, are important partners in identifying inclusive and excluding language and ways to overcome potential breakdowns in communication.

Adults are important partners in young people’s participation and need to facilitate and support young people to take responsibility themselves. But adults must also be sensitive to times when young people would rather choose not to participate or to participate to a lesser degree.

An intersectional perspective that acknowledges the simultaneous effects of multiple belongings is important in childhood studies to identify children and young people in vulnerable situations.

**Suggestions for further research**

The methodology of an interactive research circle applied in this project needs to be tested with other groups of children and young people and in other contexts than Sweden. More exploration is needed around the use of additional arenas for young research partners to provide their views on the topic and the joint research process. In this research project the creation of a virtual group where discussions in the research circle could be extended in space and place and take place outside research meetings was tested, but only to a limited degree. Such platforms provide less outspoken children and young people with an extra opportunity to express their views on various matters. They can also be used as arenas where children and young people can try out different opinions about a topic or subject.

The results of this project also call for further exploration of the effects of having communicative disabilities on participation in school as well as of the potential discrimination of girls with multiple disabilities. One possible explanation of the different experiences of participation in school described by the girls and boys with multiple disabilities is that having disabilities is a greater contrast to the ideal image of a girl than of a boy. Another possible explanation is that schools are less accessible to girls with multiple disabilities than to boys with multiple disabilities. These explanations need to be empirically researched.

Another observation described in this research project that needs further research is the non-response rate among young people to the question in ‘Life and Health Young People 2011’ on whether they had a disability. Such research is important in the future use of self-reported disability data from children and young people.
Implications for social work and schools

An implication of this research project for social workers, teachers and other professionals committed to children and young people’s participation is that promoting their participation must include social, educational, communicative and decision-making dimensions of participation. Participation is often described as children and young people’s right to make their voices heard and to be listened to. This project shows the importance of acknowledging that young people sometimes prefer not to participate. They describe for example how on some occasions they do not feel ready to shoulder the responsibility that they perceive to come with participation. Providing participatory opportunities where students can choose various degrees and forms of participation would be a way to promote their participation while still respecting their rights and acknowledging that they need various levels of support to participate in school.

That adults in school are described by young people as partners in participation is an implication of this project. Adults in school play an important role in creating a climate where young people feel secure and where they are enabled to act as social agents and take responsibility. Such an approach requires recognizing children and young people as valuable contributors to interactions and decision-making in school, and as partners in relations that condition, constrain and facilitate their participation in various ways.

The vulnerable situation of students with multiple disabilities that is described in this project implies that extra resources are needed to enable them to participate on equal terms as other students in school. Such efforts will have to include working against degrading treatment such as bullying and threats in schools and to identify possible structural discrimination of girls with multiple disabilities.

Sammanfattnings på svenska

Avhandlingen visar att delaktighet från ungdomars perspektiv är ett viktigt och mångdimensionellt begrepp. Syftet med avhandlingen är att utforska ungdomars perspektiv på och upplevelser av delaktighet i skolan. Forskningsprojektet utgår från ett barndomssociologiskt och ett rättighetsperspektiv där barn och unga förstås som kompetenta deltagare med potential att ge värdefulla bidrag till forskning om ungdomar och delaktighet i skolan. Ungdomar i åldern 13-19 år deltar i forskningsprojektet som både forskningspartners och som respondenter till två enkäter – en
References


Akademikerförbundet [The Union for Professionals Sweden]. (2006). *Etik i social arbete: etisk kod för socialarbetare* [Ethics in social work: ethical code for social workers]. Akademikerförbundet [The Union for Professionals Sweden], SSR.


Boman, Y. (2002). *Utbildningspolitik i den andra moderna: om skolans normativa villkor* [Educational policy in second modernity: on the
normative conditions of education]. Doctoral thesis. Örebro University, Department of education.


Council of Europe. 2012a. Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18. (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 28 March 2012 at the 1138th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies). Available at: wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1927229&Site=CM [Assessed 13 May 2014].


Göransson, K. (2008). *Man vill ju vara som alla andra: elevers röster om delaktighet och inkludering med fokus på elever med funktionsnedsättning*. [One wants to be like everyone else: students’ voices about participation and inclusion with a focus on students with disabili-


Kitzinger, J. (1990/97). Who are you kidding?: children, power and the struggle against sexual abuse. In: James, A. & Prout, A. (Eds.). *Con-


Available at
https://www.bemidjistate.edu/academics/publications/social_work_jour
nal/issue07/articles/Tension.htm Assessed 4 February 2014.

Lönnback, EB. & Östberg, F. (2007). Forskningscirklar: för kunskapför-
djupning och utvecklingsarbete [Research circles for knowledge impro-
vement and development work]. Stockholm: Forsknings- och utveck-
lingsenheten [Department for research and development].

with children. In: Thomas, N. & Percy-Smith, B. (Eds.). A handbook of
children and young people’s participation: perspectives from theory

intergenerational becoming. In: Thomas, N. & Percy-Smith, B. (Eds.).
A handbook of children and young people’s participation: perspectives

diska barndomar 1900-2000 [Children and welfare policy: Nordic

Martin, K. & Franklin, A. (2010). Disabled children and participation in
the UK: reality or rhetoric. In: Thomas, N. & Percy-Smith, B. (Eds.). A
handbook of children and young people’s participation: perspectives

press.

participation: applying a cross-cultural lens. In: Thomas, N. & Percy-
Smith, B. (Eds.). A handbook of children and young people’s participa-
tion: perspectives from theory and practice. (125-132). Abingdon, Ox-
on: Routledge.

Mathew, A., Martelli, A., Bertozzi, R. & de Luigi, N. (2010). Commen-
tary 2: on working with particular groups. In: Thomas, N. & Percy-
Smith, B. (Eds.). A handbook of children and young people’s participa-
tion: perspectives from theory and practice. (121-124). Abingdon,
Oxon: Routledge.


Rosvall, P-Å. (2012). “…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 you could participate in deciding how it should be done…”: an ethnographic study of student participation in secondary schools]. Doctoral thesis. Umeå University, School of Education.


Svensson, L., Brulin, G. & Ellström, P-E. (2002). Interaktiv forskning: för utveckling av teori och praktik [Interactive research for development of


UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2013). *General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para. 1)*. Available at


Hi!

We’re a group of nine teenagers 15–18 years old who are researching young people. Together with a circle leader we’ve started a research circle. We come from the schools Brickebacken, Karolinska and Risbergska. The research project is a collaboration between these schools and Örebro University.

The purpose of our research circle is to investigate participation and exposure to bullying in school, from the perspective of young people. We’re doing this because much of the research on schools has been done by adults. So now we’re interested in what you think. Consider this a unique opportunity to make your voice heard!

After collecting all the questionnaires and drawing our conclusions, we plan to tell other people what we’ve discovered. This can include verbally presenting our results to politicians, practitioners and researchers. We also plan to put together a written compilation of the most significant results.

Answering the questionnaire is entirely voluntary. It’s not something that you have to do, and your grades won’t be affected if you don’t participate. Don’t write your name on the questionnaire. Because you will put the questionnaire in an envelope, no one will know how you have answered. We are very grateful to you for taking the time to respond to the questionnaire.

THANKS!

Contact person  Contact details
Jeanette Åkerström  tel: 073-992 51 57
Research group ICU  e-mail: jeanne.aakerstrom@oru.se
Below are some questions about you and about school. Some of the questions require you to fill in the blank. Other questions are multiple choice; in that case, circle the answer that fits best.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU

1. I’m a Girl Boy

2. I was born in Sweden Elsewhere in Europe Outside Europe

3. I’m in 9th grade 1st year 2nd year 3rd year

4. I attend __________________________school.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL

5. What does participation in school mean to you?

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

6. When do you not feel like a participant in school?

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

7. How important is it to you to participate in decisions about what happens at school?

Very much Somewhat Not so much Not at all

8. What decisions would you like to take part in making at school?

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

1
9. Can you participate in decision-making at school as much as you would like?

Too much  Just right  Too little

10. How important is it to you to have friends in school?

Very much  Somewhat  Not so much  Not at all

Why?__________________________________________________________

11. Do you spend time with who you want at school?

Yes  Partly  No  Don’t have friends

12. Have you ever felt left out when talking with your friends?

Yes  No

If yes, in what way?_____________________________________________

13. Have you ever felt left out when the teacher was teaching?

Yes  No

If yes, in what way?_____________________________________________

14. Think of a situation when you learned something in school;

a. What happened?_____________________________________________

b. What caused you to learn something?_________________________
Think of a situation when you felt that you didn’t learn something;

c. What happened?________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

d. What would have changed the situation?________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

15. Is it necessary for you to want to learn in order to learn anything during lessons?
   Yes               Somewhat               No

16. What should the teacher be like for you to want to learn?________________________________________________

17. What should things be like for you to feel comfortable saying something during lessons?

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

18. Do you feel that teachers treat girls and boys the same in class?
   Yes               No

If no, what’s the difference?________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

19. Have you ever felt that you were treated degradingly, insulted or bullied without provocation by another student at school?
   Yes               No

   a. If yes, what happened?____________________________________________

   _________________________________________________________________

   _________________________________________________________________

   b. How did you react?

   _________________________________________________________________
20. Have you ever felt that you were treated degradingly, insulted or bullied without provocation by an adult at school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

a. If yes, what happened?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

b. How did you react?

____________________________________________________________________

21. If you have special needs, do you feel that they are adequately met in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Partly</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Doesn’t apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Comments

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

22. Do you have a disability?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If yes, what?

____________________________________________________________________

Additional comments

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
Young people's voices on participation in school

Jeanette Åkerström
Mikaela Bdaoui
Frida Boson
Elin Brandt Korall
Hanna Jansson

Elin Kleber
Frida Matthiesen
Frida Pettersson
Helin Talayhan
Elinor Brunnberg
The report you are holding in your hands is a report written FOR young people and adults about participation in school. The report was written BY young people and researchers who together carried out a study of young people’s perceptions and experiences of participation in school life. The study was conducted in a research circle in which eight young people worked alongside two researchers. The research team created and conducted a survey in the form of a questionnaire for young people. The report presents how one hundred students responded to the survey in spring 2010.
Researchers’ Preface

In educational research, various definitions have been proposed to explain participation in school. However, few of these studies have asked young students about what the concept of participation in school means for them. This study is an attempt to define students’ perspectives on participation in school life by involving them both as research partners and as respondents to a survey.

Thanks to you, our young research partners, we were able to identify and include more dimensions of participation than are usually covered in research about participation in school. You facilitated access to the school and made valuable contributions about language use, as well as ethically formulated and relevant survey questions. When we analysed the results, your experiences as students were of great benefit as it gave us new understanding of certain statements made in the responses to the survey.

Working in interaction with you meant that we as researchers did not completely control the research process. Research questions, choice of research methods, analysis and dissemination of the final results were jointly decided in the circle. Initially, this felt unusual and a bit scary for us as researchers. We did, however, quickly discover that we could rely completely on you and have great confidence in your ability to work, reflect and discuss about the issues at stake. This report presents a more complex picture of what it is like to be young today than would have been possible without your inputs in the study.

There are many people who have helped to make this report possible. Thanks to all the students who responded to the survey. To our research partners we want to say that it has been a true privilege for us to learn from your experiences and to be given the opportunity to grow and develop together with you!

Jeanette Åkerström and Elinor Brunnberg September 2010
Research partners’ Preface

Participation, in various ways, is a right of all students in school. *But what really counts as participation, and where is the limit? Are all students sufficiently informed of this right?*

These were the issues that aroused our interest and made us get involved in the research circle. We also liked the idea that we would be able to use our own experiences and work with students from different schools on a common project.

Our participation in the research circle was more instructive than any of us could have imagined. We learned about all sorts of things, from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to how to analyse the results of questionnaires. But much of what we did was also about our own opinions - our experiences were valued! The results of our research were also used in practical everyday life. This made us really realise how important knowledge is, regardless of whether we got it from each other or from Jeanette and Elinor.

Within the research circle, everyone's opinions were listened to and treated with respect. This created a sense of belonging in the group and led to great collaboration!

Something that we truly realised in the research circle is the importance of an overall picture of an issue, and also that the inclusion of young people’s perspectives is especially important when the research is about young people. The world of young people changes quickly, and the changes can be difficult to understand for someone who does not live in this world.

We want to thank all students who participated as respondents. Your views helped us progress in our work. We thank our patient and committed leaders - Jeanette and Elinor. We would also like to thank each other for daring to accept the challenge – together we did an incredible job!

*Helin Talayhan September 2010*
# Contents

1. BACKGROUND *(RESEARCHERS)* 10

2. DESIGN AND PRODUCTION OF THE REPORT 12

3. METHOD *(YOUNG PEOPLE)* 13

4. RESULTS 16

4.1 Four main types of participation in school life 16

4.2 Communicative participation 19

4.3 Political participation 20

4.4 Social participation 21

4.5 Participation in learning 22

4.5.1 How teachers can increase students’ desire to learn 24

4.6 Horizontal and vertical exposure 25

5. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS *(YOUNG PEOPLE)* 28

5.1 Summary and main result 28

5.2 Suggestions on how to increase student participation in school 29

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS *(RESEARCHERS)* 30

REFERENCES 32

APPENDIX 1
1. Background (researchers)

In autumn 2009, two researchers at Örebro University, Sweden took the initiative to invite young students to participate in a research circle. Invitations went to secondary and upper secondary school classes, both in mainstream schools and special schools for students hard-of-hearing. The research circle started in January 2010. The research circle members comprised young students from three different schools in the city of Örebro, a doctoral student, and a senior researcher from Örebro University and Mälardalen University, Sweden. The doctoral student acted as project manager with responsibility to drive the research circle forward. She also provided appropriate training in each new phase of the research process. The senior researcher acted as supervisor and had ultimate responsibility for research quality as well as some training in data analysis.

Our work in the research circle is an example of interactive research. This means that researchers and people with no formal training in research work learn together throughout the research process (Svensson & Aagaard Nielsen, 2006). Three important characteristics of interactive research processes are

→ integration of various kinds of knowledge in a joint knowledge formation
→ equal collaborations between researchers and those who the research concerns
→ ambitions to contribute to change processes

(Swedish Interactive Research Association, SIRA, 2007)

Researchers’ participation in interactive research is important since they have the training to collect and process data, and to relate findings to theory and previous research. Equally important in interactive research is the partners’ expertise in terms of determining relevant research questions, as well as their ability to scrutinise mainstream theories and policies from an insider perspective (Westland, 2006). In our research circle, it was important that young students got involved. With their experience of what it is like to be a young student in society today, our young research partners highlighted important determinants for young people’s perceptions of participation in school.

Before initiating a research project that involves humans all Swedish research has to be vetted from an ethical perspective (Central Ethical Review Board, 2010). The application for this involves describing the purpose of the intended project, key research questions, data collection methods, and from which people information will be gathered. Prior to the initiation of the research circle, our
study was vetted and approved by one of the Regional Ethical Review Boards. In our application, we as researchers tried to account for the dynamics and openness that characterise interactive research, but did not completely succeed in this. Already in the early stages of the research circle, the young research partners proposed using interviews as a complementary data collection method. Renewed contact with the Regional Ethical Review Board clarified that the original vetting did not include interviews as a data collection method. As a new vetting procedure would have delayed the project, which would mean that some of the circle members would not have been able to take part in the entire research process, we made a joint decision not to conduct interviews as a data collection method.

The concept of the research circle developed from the Swedish tradition of study circles and their agenda of democratic and joint learning (Lundberg & Starrin, 1990). Research circles have been successfully used to carry out interactive research in schools (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003; Persson, 2009). However, in the vast majority of these circles, only adults have been involved as participants.

In recent years there has been an increase in research involving young people as research partners (Kellett, 2005). However, at an international congress in 2010 about interactive research approaches very few studies involved young people as research partners. In a Swedish context, we only know of one research circle where young people have participated as research partners. In that study, upper secondary students and researchers examined well-being and health in school (Sundberg, Forsberg & Lundberg, 2006:8).

Both from a quality perspective as well as a children’s rights perspective it is important that young people can make their voices heard in interactive research settings. This study is an important contribution to such a development.

---

1 ALARA World Congress 2010, Participatory Action Research and Action Learning: Appreciating our Pasts, Comprehending our Presents, Prefiguring our Futures, Action Learning and Action Research Association, Melbourne 6-9 September.
2. Design and Production of the report

The report is divided into six parts: Background, Design and Production, Method, Results, Discussion and Suggestions, and Concluding Remarks. Everyone in the research circle has contributed to the written text. Researchers and young people have, however, focused on different elements and the researchers have been responsible for compiling the report.

In this brochure the sections describing the background to the study, as well as design and production were written by the researchers. The method section describes our work in the circle and was written by the young research partners. The results section summarises the main findings of the survey, in which one hundred students participated as respondents. The results are divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, written jointly by young people and researchers, the main findings are summarised in a model of participation in school life. The model includes four types of participation and these are presented in greater detail by the young people in chapters’ two to five of the results section. The sixth and final results chapter is about vertical and horizontal exposure in school. This chapter was written by young people and researchers together and examines different strategies that students use to handle situations when they have experienced mistreatment from adults or peers at school. The discussion section consists of two parts in which young research partners summarise the main findings and provide suggestions about how to increase student participation in school life. In the concluding remarks, researchers make some comments on the impact of the results as well as some challenges arising when involving young people as research partners.

The text was translated into English by the project manager and then reviewed by an English translator.
3. Method *(young people)*

The first thing that happened in the circle was that Jeanette gave us Post-It notes on which we were to write what we thought was meant by participation in school life, and what it did not mean. We put our Post-It notes on a wall so that everyone could see and discuss what the others had written. To help us start thinking about participation in school life, Jeanette also equipped each of us young people with a disposable camera. With the cameras we took photos of situations that we thought illustrated participation as well as non-participation in school. At the second meeting in the research circle, we sorted the photos according to what kind of participation they illustrated. Using both the photos, and the Post-It notes that we wrote during our first meeting, we identified that participation in school life could be divided into four main types.

Having obtained an overall picture of what participation in school life meant we went on to discuss what research questions would guide our future work in the circle. After a brainstorming session, we chose the ideas that we thought were most interesting. The research questions that we chose to examine where:

- How do students and teachers perceive and experience the various types of participation?
- What do students and teachers think about their responsibility to participate in school life

Before we asked students and teachers about what they thought about participation in school, we learned more about children’s rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We also learned about research ethics and various data collection methods. We made a joint decision to carry out a survey that included both questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers. Before we had been invited to the research circle, Jeanette (our project manager) and Elinor (our research supervisor) had written to the Regional Ethical Review Board. The Board had said that it was okay for us to use questionnaires as data collection method. However, when Jeanette and Elinor asked about interviews, the Board would not allow us to use interviews in our study without making a new application for ethical vetting. We then decided not to do any interviews at this time.

The questionnaires that we created contained both closed questions (where you could tick a box with your preferred answer), as well as open questions (where
you could write freely). When creating our questionnaires we were inspired by existing surveys used in earlier research. We also tested the questionnaires on friends and family members to see if we needed to adjust anything.

We contacted seven classes in three different schools to tell students about what we were doing and to ask them to participate. We worked in small groups that, together with Jeanette, visited two classes each. Jeanette also visited three teacher teams at two different schools to distribute their questionnaires. Unfortunately, only a small number of these questionnaires came back and we have not included them in our analysis.

A total of one hundred students (sixty one girls and thirty nine boys) from three secondary and upper secondary schools responded to our questionnaire. Respondents came from both mainstream and special schools for students who were hard-of-hearing. The survey was completed during lesson time and those who were not in school that day (thirty-three students) were excluded from the study. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary. One student chose not to complete the questionnaire, so the total number of exclusions from the study was thirty-four.

In the Easter break, we held a workshop to initiate the analysis of the information we had got from our respondents. Jeanette had compiled all the data and we received a thick stack of paper with frequency tables and cross-tabulations from the answers of all closed survey questions. She explained how to read the tables and we went through them all to select those we thought were most important, interesting or surprising. Jeanette then converted these into charts which we used to illustrate the results in the report.

To analyse the open survey questions, we worked in small groups where each group was responsible for one or two of the survey questions. We analysed response to a question using content analysis, which Elinor trained us in. This means that we clustered all responses to a question into sub-groups using pencils of various colours. Creating sub-groups within each question helped us to get a comprehensive understanding of the variations in responses to a question. We also wrote short summaries of the responses to each question. When one group had finished their analysis, it was critically reviewed by one of the other groups to determine whether they agreed with the analysis or not.
At the first meeting of the research circle, Jeanette suggested that we met every third week. However, we later made a joint decision to meet every second week so there would be no postponement of the planned conclusion date for the circle. We met either at a café in the city centre (Märtas Café) that is popular with young students, or at Örebro University. A few times we also tried to have meetings via the Internet. However, we gave up that idea quite quickly as we young people did not think that it was as efficient as meeting face-to-face.

A good thing in our circle was that, at an early stage, we created a contract that stated our agreed conduct of behaviour in the circle (Appendix 1). This created an atmosphere in the circle where you dared to say everything that came to mind.

The things that we found out in our analysis are published in this report. We have also been invited to talk about our experiences as research partners with politicians, practitioners and researchers at various national conferences.
4. Results

The results section summarises the responses of the one hundred students who answered the questionnaire, and is divided into six chapters. The first chapter illustrates various forms of participation in school, identified in the research circle and supported by the respondents. The four main types of participation are incorporated into the comprehensive model ‘Young People’s Perspectives on Participation in School Life’. The four main types of participation are also presented in more detail in chapters two to five of the results section. The sixth results chapter is about vertical and horizontal exposure in school. Exposure can be described as an antonym for participation, and is therefore an important element in gaining a comprehensive understanding of young people’s experiences of participation.

4.1 Four main types of participation in school life

Young people defined participation in school life as being listened to and taking part in decision-making processes. In our study we call this way of being involved in school political participation (see also Elvstrand, 2009). Student councils, school meal councils, and class councils are perceived as good because they give students the opportunity to influence and make their voices heard. When students have no access to decision-making in school, they feel excluded from an important aspect of school life. Students feel that it is the responsibility of adults in school to invite young people into decision-making processes. In response to the survey-question "When do you not feel that you are participating in school", one respondent stated:

When teachers decide not to ask students what they think or feel. (Boy, upper secondary school)

But respondents also identified having friends as an important dimension of participation in school. In the report this is called social participation. Social and political participation differ in terms of stakeholders. Whereas adults control students’ participation in decision making, it is peers that determine the degree of social participation. Students also describe their own responsibility in getting involved in social and extracurricular activities.
A third type of participation in school life is called participation in learning. Young research partners described this type of participation as feeling a desire to learn, to be motivated and to feel an engagement in what is taught. For most respondents, experiencing this type of participation is vital for them performing well in school. Respondents felt that enhancing students’ desire to work required good working relationships between students and teachers. Respondents believed that it is the teachers’ duty to motivate students to learn. However, they also highlighted their own responsibility for doing what is expected of them in order to be a good student, i.e. attend school, do homework, be active rather than passive, and respect the needs and rights of classmates.

*Participation in learning is to listen, take notes and be generally active. (Boy, upper secondary)*

A fourth and crucial type of participation is inclusion in the linguistic context. Young research partners described it as being active in various kinds of dialogues, and in the report it is called communicative participation. Communicative participation is interrelated to the other three types of participation in school life as it determines the student’s ability to get involved in lessons and in decision-making, as well as with peers. Students with a hearing impairment described communicative participation as hearing what your peers say and having time to respond appropriately, as well as having teachers who are sufficiently skilled in sign language. But communicative participation is not primarily about hearing or not hearing. Hearing respondents also described experiences of non-participation due to teachers using words that they do not understand, or when peers talk about issues that are unfamiliar.

The interrelationship between the different types of participation in school life is illustrated in the model ‘Young People’s Perspectives on Participation in School Life’ (Figure 1). Participation is described as desirable and something that adults should promote. But young people also highlighted their responsibility in making themselves participate as well as their duty to show peers and teachers respect. Consequently, the triad of ‘Rights, Responsibilities, and Duties’ is included as it is identified as a key aspect of young people’s experiences of participation in school life.
FIGURE 1: Young People’s Perspectives on Participation in School Life

- POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
  - Teacher - Student

- COMMUNICATIVE PARTICIPATION
  - Teacher – Student
  - Student - Student

- SOCIAL PARTICIPATION
  - Student - Student

- PARTICIPATE IN LEARNING
  - Teacher - Student

Responsibility → Right
Duty

FIGURE 1: Young People’s Perspectives on Participation in School Life
4.2 Communicative participation

Chatting with friends

Without a common language, students’ social participation immediately decreases. Respondents with a hearing impairment described that they sometimes did not have enough time to hear what peers said when they used spoken Swedish. In such situations, the students said that they sometimes chose not to ask the speaker to repeat what she or he had just said. They also described that sometimes, when they did ask, they were told by the group that it was irrelevant and the group just went on to discuss another subject. The student who had asked for a repetition could then feel excluded from the social fellowship in the group.

But having a common language is not as much about hearing or not hearing as it is about having the same experiences. More than one in five students (23%) said they sometimes felt excluded when friends talk with each other. It might be that they talk about common experiences that you do not share, when you do not know the people they are talking about, or when you do not understand your peers’ way of reasoning.

[It is like when] you feel you are not invited into the conversation and they seem to think that you should not really be there. (Girl, upper secondary)

It is more common for girls (27%) than boys (17%) to describe that they have felt excluded when peers talk to each other. Usually, respondents describe situations where they have felt temporary exclusion. However, some accounts describe experiences, which could be referred to as systematic discriminations, where peers never listen, walk away when you start talking, or form groups in which the respondent does not feel welcome.

Understanding what the teacher says

Almost one in five students (19%) has felt excluded during lessons because they have not understood what the teacher was talking about. The respondents think it is difficult to feel engaged in learning when the teacher is talking too fast or not contextualising the subject. When students experience exclusion from teaching they easily lose concentration, get bored or feel sad.

It's never fun to have a teacher who is not engaged in the students or the subject. [It is] the opposite for me having the "desire" to learn. (Girl, upper secondary)

Accounts from respondents with hearing impairments describe situations when participation in learning becomes extremely challenging. These are situations when there is no interpreter, the technology does not work, or the teacher has insufficient proficiency in sign language. Among respondents with disabilities, more than one in four students (27%) said they had felt excluded during lessons.
4.3 Political participation

A majority of the students (76%) think that it is important to be part of decision-making in school. Among respondents in secondary school the percentage is even higher (82% versus 72% among respondents in upper secondary schools). Although many of the respondents are satisfied with their present degree of political participation, one in four (27%) wishes that they had more influence in decision-making at school. Compared to the girls, it was a greater proportion of the boys (38% versus 22% of the girls) who wanted more influence in school (Figure 2). There is also a small group of students who think that they have too much influence.

**FIGURE 2: Perceived political participation by gender**

It is also a larger proportion of respondents with a disability (40% versus 24% of students with no disability) that are dissatisfied with the degree of influence that they have in school today (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3: Perceived political participation by function**
Students want to be involved in planning schoolwork, discussing how teachers and students can work together to create a good working climate, and participate in decisions concerning food served in the school dining room, as well as facilities and social activities in school.

[I want to take part in decisions about] studies and general things such as locker placement ... everything that concerns us students. (Boy, upper secondary)

4.4 Social participation

Respondents describe school as being both a workplace and a place where you meet friends and have fun. Peers are perceived as important since they can support and inspire you to perform better in school. With a friend in school you have someone to share your thoughts and ideas with and friends can also protect you from feeling lonely.

Friends in school are important so you don’t feel alone or vulnerable. You need someone you like to hang out with and talk to in order to enjoy school. (Girl, upper secondary)

Some respondents describe peers as being so vital that they would not want to go to school if they did not have friends there. However, some admit that peers sometimes make them lose concentration on their school work. There seems to be a difference in the importance of friends in school depending on whether students regard school primarily as a workplace or as a social venue. When school is regarded as a workplace, peers are described as being important as they help you to perform better in school. However, it is not so vital to have your best friends in school.

[It is] important to have people to hang out with and so on. But real friends need not necessarily attend the same school. (Girl, upper secondary)

Most students are satisfied with the friends they have in school. But some respondents in very small classes said that they do not have that many peers to choose to hang out with. These respondents describe that they usually socialise with the whole class. However, if there are distinct groups in the class and you do not find someone to hang out with, it is easy to feel excluded.
4.5 Participation in learning

Desire to learn

The last type of participation identified in the report describes experiences related to school work and the desire to learn. Respondents made a clear connection between feeling a desire to learn and school performance. Nine out of ten students (91%) thinks that their desire to learn influences their capacity to learn. Desiring to learn is described as being active rather than passive, being inspired and motivated, and understanding the context of subjects taught during a lesson. A small group of students (9%) stated that desire to learn did not matter in terms of their capacity to do their school work. In this group there were three times as many boys (17%) as girls (5%).

*I study as much as I can, regardless of whether I am bored.* (Boy, secondary)

Taking responsibility

To experience participation in school, respondents believe it is their responsibility to go to school, concentrate, be motivated, listen, take an interest, and do their homework. They think of these things in terms of what is expected of them as students and also describe that they have a duty not to infringe on peers’ ability to learn or teachers’ ability to teach in school. Respondents also talk of the need for collaboration between teachers and students to increase participation in learning. One quotation that illustrates this is one respondents answer to the survey question “What would have changed a situation where you felt that you did not learn anything?” was:

*I should have been more focused and the teacher should have been more dedicated.* (Boy, upper secondary)

Students need to feel confident that the teacher and peers will listen to and respect their opinions if they are to speak out in class. Respondents state that it should be okay to say the wrong thing sometimes without being ridiculed or judged. Noise levels in class also influence students’ comfort about speaking out loud in class, but in somewhat different ways. Some respondents find it easier to speak out when it is silent, while others prefer there to be some small talk in the classroom because they will not attract as much attention when they speak up. However, if the classroom environment is chaotic and loud, students will ex-
perience difficulties in concentration. Respondents also described that they ex-
pected the teacher to be present and keep order during the lessons.

Survey question: *What would make you feel comfortable about speaking up in
class?*

Answer: *When you’ve raised your hand to say something the teacher should
really listen and try to understand you. [She] must also control the class so that
you know that no one will start to laugh.* (Girl, upper secondary)
4.5.1 How teachers can increase students’ desire to learn

Students desire to learn is increased if the teacher shows engagement and likes teaching her subject. Students’ motivation is also affected by how the teacher introduces the subject. If the teacher explains clearly what is to be reviewed and what students are expected to learn, it is easier for students to understand why it is important to learn about a subject. Respondents also state that it is important that the teacher is strict and does not lose track during lessons. A good way to get students’ attention is to explain the subject in a broader context and give examples that students can relate to their own experiences.

[The teacher can] explain with examples and compare to everyday life so that you understand why it is important that you learn about the subject. (Girl, upper secondary)

Respondents stated that it is important to feel active rather than passive during lessons, or they lose concentration and become bored. But being active means different things to different students. Some said it meant having enough time to take notes, for others it was doing something creative, while others described it as having open discussions about the subject.

If the lesson is long it needs to be broken down to include some interactive exercises. But respondents warned that these exercises had to mean something. They did not, for example, like the teacher to be over-explicit, or to ask obvious or purely hypothetical questions, since it made them feel ridiculed. Also, it was very important that the teacher, having asked a question, really listened to the student’s answer.

Respondents reported that they became more engaged in school if they had positive and enthusiastic teachers. It is also important for students’ capacity to perform well in school that the teacher speaks to students as individuals, and meets individual needs. When asked how a teacher should act to improve the desire to learn, the respondents emphasised that it was important to have a teacher who believed in them.

Teachers should be positive and give me hope. (Boy, secondary)
**Equal treatment**
Some respondents described situations where the teacher distinguished between students in class. Some felt that the teacher ignored them in favour of more gifted and talented students. One out of five students (21%) felt that their teachers distinguished between girls and boys in class. The difference was described as girls not being reprimanded or being treated more kindly than boys. The teacher could place greater demands on girls to perform well and behave in school, but boys were seen as getting most of the teachers’ attention.

*You don’t always have the chance to say what you want to say. The teacher has already pointed to the smartest person in the class and asked her or him. (Boy, upper secondary).*

**4.6 Horizontal and vertical exposure**
Almost one in five respondents (17%) had been subjected to mistreatment by a peer in school. Survey accounts described experiences of unpleasant comments, scorn, physical abuse or exclusion from the social fellowship in class. Since it is a student who treats another student badly we call this kind of experiences **horizontal exposure**. It was five times as common for girls (20%) to have experienced horizontal exposure compared to boys (4%). It was also more common for respondents born in a country outside Europe to have experienced horizontal exposure compared to respondents born in Europe (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Experienced horizontal exposure by country of origin](image-url)
When it is an adult in school who treats a student badly we call it **vertical exposure**. Fewer respondents (7%) reported experiences of vertical exposure, yet more than one student in twenty (that is about one or two students per class) had experienced mistreatment from an adult at school. Students described feelings of vertical exposure when they had been verbally abused or when a teacher had questioned their capacities or distinguished very pointedly between students.

*The teacher yelled at me but not the other person who did the same thing. (Boy, upper secondary)*

Analysing survey accounts of ideal classroom situations, we found descriptions where respondents indicated experiences that came close to both horizontal and vertical exposure. The following quotes are two students’ answers to the survey question **“What would make you feel comfortable about speaking up in class?”** The quotations describe ideal situations where students are free from horizontal and vertical exposure.

*I need to know that I am not going to be ignored or mocked for what I say. (Girl, upper secondary, horizontal exposure)*

*The teacher should not have too high expectations or correct me constantly if I say something wrong. (Girl, upper secondary, vertical exposure)*

Among respondents reporting experiences of vertical exposure there were little variations between boys and girls, schools, or the country in which the student was born. However, among the respondents reporting vertical exposure there was a twice as big a proportion of students with a disability (13%) as compared to students with no disability (6%). Figure 5 illustrates experienced vertical exposure by function.

![Figure 5: Experienced vertical exposure by function](image-url)
Coping with exposure

Respondents’ strategies to cope with exposure differed according to whether they described horizontal or vertical exposure. When it was another student who had treated them badly, the students described how they coped actively by ‘getting their own back’ or by turning to an adult at the school. Others had learned strategies that helped them reduce the feeling of exposure by finding friends in other classes or going their own way.

The accounts describing vertical exposure lacked illustrations of active strategies to cope with the situation. Instead, respondents described how they internalised their anger, rage and sadness.

Survey question: *How did you react when you were treated badly by an adult at school?*
Survey account: *[I got] very angry and irritated inside. (Boy, secondary)*

Our data does not allow comments on how students deal with serious cases of abuse and bullying.
5. Discussion and Suggestions *(young people)*

5.1 Summary and main result

Our study identified four main types of participation. We have named these types communicative participation, political participation, social participation, and participation in learning. The communicative participation means that students can follow, and be part of the linguistic context both in the classroom and during breaks. Consequently, communicative participation plays a central role in all other types of participation. Without communicative participation students find it very hard to participate in learning or decision-making processes. They will also feel socially excluded amongst peers.

Political participation is important for students’ capacity for achievement at school. Three out of four students think it is important to be able to exert influence in school. A greater proportion among boys, students born in a country outside Europe, and students with disabilities would like to have more influence than they have today. This could be interpreted that gender, country of origin and function influences students’ opportunities to make their voices heard in school.

Teachers and students must work together to increase participation in learning. Giving students the opportunity to feel a desire to learn is vital to achievement. It is also a joint responsibility of students and teachers.

The social participation is of great importance if the student is to enjoy school. It can also affect students’ academic performance since peer support motivates you to do better in school, as well as protecting you from feeling exposed.

In conclusion, all four types of participation are interrelated and greatly impact on student performance in school. Participation is based on the interaction, but various types of participation involve various forms of relationships and stakeholders. In communicative participation, which determines all other forms of participation, both teacher-student and student-student relationships are vital. In social participation it is the student-student relationship that is important and peers guard access to this arena, whereas it is the adults who are in the position to invite students into political participation. The last type, participation in learn-
ing, is also defined by the teacher-student relationship. Three key words generated in the study are responsibility, right and duty. Students believe that it is both teachers’ and students' responsibility to provide opportunities for students to perform well in school. However, a student also has a duty not to prevent someone else from participating in school. It is a duty to allow others to participate, but also a responsibility to ensure that you feel involved by actively making yourself participate.

5.2 Suggestions on how to increase student participation in school

To increase students’ participation in school they need to know about the contents of key documents that define course objectives, grading criteria and curricula. They also need to be informed about what laws and rules apply to school. If students are to have a real influence in decision-making in schools they need to know where they can actually have an impact.

At school, we believe that direct democracy is better than representative democracy. This would give all students the same opportunity for participation, instead of it only being a small group that has been selected to represent all students at the school. Sometimes it is more of a sham democracy when only a few students are involved in making decisions and planning with the teachers.

To perform well in school, it is important that students and teachers can meet at the same level and we do not think the school should be a place where the student feels inferior to the teacher. If everyone in the school knows what their rights are and what rules and policies they are required to live up to it will create a workplace where you can feel involved, thrive and enjoy.

It is also important to take advantage of different experiences when making school a good place to work. All students must have a chance to make their voices heard when policies and rules of the school are decided. Then the joint knowledge that would form the foundation for the school’s norms and rules would be based on experiences from all over the world. How nice that would be!
6 Concluding Remarks (researchers)

Although both girls and boys were invited to the research circle it was only girls who got involved in the circle. Boys’ voices are represented in the survey accounts, but the conceptualisation, research questions and results analysis might have been expanded if boys had also been represented as research partners. Consequently, when inviting young people to be research partners, strategies need to be adapted to reach various groups of young people.

In the report we use the term school life. This concept is a play on words to draw attention to the similarity between young people’s schooling and adults’ work. A student in secondary and upper secondary school is expected to be present five days a week and between thirty and forty hours per week. Going to school is therefore a full-time job in which young people in Sweden are enrolled for most of their childhood. Factors like having the ability to participate in an open dialogue, feeling support, good leadership, an adequate workload, a positive working atmosphere, developmental opportunities, and feeling secure have been identified as factors that promote health in a workplace (Angelöw, 2002). All these factors are represented in the survey responses as part of how students describe the concept of participation in school life. Moreover, respondents also provided thoughtful suggestions about how to increase young people’s participation in school life. When working to promote a healthy school life, young students, as experts on their everyday life experiences, have a key role to play.

School life is an important part of young people’s childhood here and now. School is both a place where they go to work and a place to meet friends and have fun. These two are, however, interrelated and respondents frequently described the importance of friends and social activities for performing well in school. Teaching in school is often about what is important to know in order to become a responsible, educated and autonomous adult in a democratic society. Social contacts with peers, on the other hand, are vital in childhood. When future and current investments compete for young students’ limited time resources, young people must set priorities. It can be a difficult choice between prioritising what is of immediate importance and what is claimed to be useful in a still abstract future. One of the experiences that we noticed in the research circle is that young people and adults use different tenses when they organise their lives. While adults often plan far ahead, young people organise their life a lot more in the present. A major reason for young people’s preferred organising strategy
might be that they do not own their time on the same terms as adults do. The structural frames within which young people plan their time relatively freely are controlled by adults and most often determined by adults’ priorities and time perspective. According to the respondents, one suggestion to give students an incentive to prioritise learning for the future was to combine future and present by relating the subject to their everyday experiences.

An interesting result in the report is how young people think about participation in school life in relation to rights. The adult tendency to connect young people’s rights with their needs was supported neither by the young research partners nor by respondents. Instead, young people related their rights to both responsibilities and duties. This variation in how adults and young people talk about their rights is interesting and needs further analysis in order to fulfil the Convention on the Rights of the Child in a way that also acknowledges children’s right to protection and adult care.

Young people do not belong to a homogenous group; they are girls and boys with different interests, different backgrounds and different dreams. It is therefore important to consider whose voices were not represented in order to identify remaining knowledge gaps. Young people that were not included in our study were students who are under the age of fifteen, students who are enrolled in schools for children with intellectual disabilities, and young people who are not subject to compulsory school attendance due to lack of Swedish residence permits. Moreover, since the survey was carried out during school time, there are two important groups of young people whose voices are also missing in the report. These groups consist of students not present the day of the survey due to illness, but also the group of young students who actively opt out of participation in school life by truancy.

If you are interested in knowing more about how a research circle works, you can get in touch with Jeanette Åkerström, jeanette.akerstrom@oru.se, or Elinor Brunnberg, elinor.brunnberg@mdh.se.
References


Appendix 1

CONDUCT OF BEHAVIOUR

I ______________________________ agree with the following rules during the time that the research circle is running, up to September 2010.

To carry our research together we in the research circle are to:

1. Acknowledge each other and help each other to develop.

2. Make decisions together. *If we cannot agree, majority decisions will be made and opposing opinions will be recorded.*

3. Be kind to each other and respect each other’s opinions and diversities.

4. Listen when someone talks and not interrupt.

5. Not tell others what individual circle members say or do. *This also applies to our information providers.*

6. Learn from each other and allow people to change their minds.

7. Do my best to be active in the circle and contribute to the research as best as I can.

8. Initiate all meetings with a summary to make sure that everyone is informed about activities and progress of the circle.

9. Try to join as many meetings as possible. *If I cannot come I will inform Jeanette via phone [...] or mail [...].*

We will work together to analyse, summarise and disseminate our findings. The final findings are owned by the research group ICU and may only be used for scientific purposes.

I am aware that my participation in the research circle is voluntary and that I may conclude my participation at any time. However, as long as I am a circle member I will do my best to follow the above agreements.

______________________________   __________________
Signature        Date
ICU - I see you
Mälardalen University
Örebro University
2010
14. Åkerström, Jeanette (2014). “Participation is everything”: Young people’s voices on participation in school life.*

*Doctoral thesis    **Licentiate thesis