

Exploring and developing professional strategies that enhance students' voices, participation and social inclusion across primary schools and leisure-time centers

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Abstract: This article presents findings from the Danish contribution to the Erasmus+ project *Social Inclusion through Pupils' Participation (SIPP)*, which aimed to enhance social inclusion in primary schools and leisure-time centers across five European countries. Focusing on *The Children's Parliament* activity, the article explores how Danish pedagogues implemented child participation through Lundy's model (space, voice, audience, influence), using an action research methodology. The analysis highlights the pedagogical challenges and opportunities in creating democratic spaces for children's perspectives while navigating power dynamics and professional roles. Drawing on Schuepbach and Lilla's framework for professionalism in extended education, the article discusses how inclusive and participatory practices can strengthen children's agency, social belonging, and educators' professional development in complex pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: Inclusion, Participation, Children's Perspectives, Professionalism in Extended Education, Action research

Introduction and research questions

In the Erasmus+ project Social Inclusion through Pupils' Participation (SIPP) five European countries, respectively Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, Italy, and Switzerland, collaborated to explore and develop professional strategies that enhance social inclusion across primary schools and leisure-time centers. In the project teachers and leisure pedagogues joined forces with researchers and students and together they originated a series of pedagogical and didactical approaches and activities, that were all grounded in the student's ideas and perspectives. The overall aim of the project was to prevent social exclusion and isolation among students in pedagogical environments, due to the enduring impact such feelings and experiences have on students' performance and general wellbeing (De Witte et al., 2013; OECD, 2018).

This article focuses on the Danish part of the project, offering insight into how Danish pedagogues approached social inclusion and participation through the specific activity *The Children's Parliament*, as well as the challenges they encountered throughout the process. Denmark's enduring commitment to democracy and equal rights profoundly shapes children's experiences from an early age. The reference to children with special needs in this introduction exemplifies how inclusive values are deeply embedded in the professional ethos of educators—a perspective that permeates this article. While the primary focus is not on special needs

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education, the inclusive framework is integral to mainstream schooling, where the prevailing expectation is that all children, regardless of ability, should be accommodated. Consequently, the distinction between mainstream education and special education has become increasingly fluid in contemporary Danish educational practice.

Historically, Denmark has, for more than a hundred years, focused on how the school system and pedagogical environments can support students and citizens with special needs, thereby working towards a just education system that provides equal opportunities for all citizens. In 1933, Denmark introduced a social reform allowing special education for children not benefiting from regular school (Hansen, 2013). A 1943 circular stated it was a mis-treatment not to adapt education to a child's abilities, and by 1958, special education became compulsory. In 1960, reforms emphasized equal opportunities and reduced segregation of children with special needs (Qvortrup, 2015). During the 1980 s, the focus shifted from integration—where the child must adapt—to inclusion, where schools adapt to all children (Pedersen, 2014). The Salamanca Declaration (1994) supported fewer segregated placements and more inclusive education globally (Qvortrup, 2014). Despite Denmark's inclusion goals, special education placements increased by 50% from 2001–2010. In 2009, Denmark ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, reinforcing its commitment to inclusive education (Pedersen, 2014). With these historical and contextual dynamics in mind, the research questions for this article are: How can student's experiences and perspectives be used as effective tools for promoting social inclusion within pedagogical environments? Additionally, how can educators be supported in developing, implementing, and evaluating practices using action research methods to enhance students' social inclusion within schools and leisure-time settings?

Background and national context

Since the early 2000 s, Danish laws and policies have increasingly reflected international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Salamanca Declaration, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the field of social and special pedagogy, inclusion is an implicit part of the Consolidation Act on Social Services, especially §11, which emphasizes coordinated support for children with special needs. Similarly, in early childhood education, the 2004 pedagogical curriculum and the 2007 Day Care Act mandate municipalities to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion through pedagogical and social initiatives (Quvang, 2015; Buus, 2014; Madsen, 2009). In 2012, Denmark introduced an inclusion law aiming to integrate more pupils with special needs into mainstream public primary school classes (Quvang, 2015). Despite earlier best practice studies, both costs and referrals to special education had increased. The law was later incorporated into the 2014 school reform, which limited support to pupils with significant needs and set a goal of 96% inclusion by 2015. However, by 2012, 94.6% were already included, and in 2016 the target was dropped following expert recommendations to focus on *qualitative* inclusion—supporting individual needs, participation, and learning environments. By 2020, inclusion had declined to 94.4%, nearly the same as in 2012.