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Rethinking education for democracy: a study of co-determination in a Norwegian school

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Through a two-day intervention in a class of 12-year-olds, this study facilitated lessons where the pupils could themselves decide methods of learning, and themes to focus on, searching for spaces and methods to activate the pupils participatory competencies. National student pupils' surveys in Norway have repeatedly shown that pupils do not feel as though they can participate in their learning at schools. The pupils in this study reported that they enjoyed this intervention and were ambitious regarding what they wished to achieve. While this may seem irrelevant or superficial at first glance, reflecting on the engagement the pupils expressed, enjoyment of learning may have been the most significant driving force for the pupil's participation. Indeed, the majority worked in groups with peers and demonstrated ownership of their thematic area and projects. However, a few pupils became insecure and passive when given the opportunity to decide for themselves. The pupils' ownership, level of ambition, and expert role in their projects indicate that their participatory abilities were activated, thus suggesting the importance of introducing co-determination as a didactical tool in school.

KEYWORDS

democratic education, participation, self-determination, critical pedagogy, ownership

1 Introduction

In the current situation in Europe, with the war in Ukraine, and the storming of the Congress building in the US, the fragility of democracy is becoming more apparent. Young people have expressed their despair through school strikes as a response to politicians' omission to act on climate change, demonstrating hopelessness in the face of an existential threat. Young people must experience that their efforts and voices matter, as trust in social organizations and governments is crucial for the survival of democracy. Giving "citizens a greater voice" to strengthen democracy has been described as a *thick* notion of democracy (Barber, 2004) and is echoed in educational policy.

Experiencing democracy by having a voice in the classroom correlates with positive attitudes to own democratic contributions, highlighting the importance of being given a space to find one's voice (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2023). Pupils should learn citizenship in a familiar context, where they live their everyday lives. An analytic report from the European Commission on participatory citizenship (Hoskins et al., 2012) underlines the importance that pupils should experience co-determination in schools by influencing decisions. It appears that there is a trend globally requesting knowledge and insight into the thick notion of democracy and increased

interest in how to operate education through democracy, described as “life skills” and “...socio-emotional and non-cognitive aspects of civics and citizenship” (Schulz et al., 2018, p. vi).

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) investigates 14-year-olds’ knowledge and understanding of democracy and civic issues through the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) (IEA, 2021; NTNU, 2021). Civic and citizenship education is evident in all the study’s 24 countries but although democracy is a thematic area in schools, only two-fifths of the pupils in the survey report having participated in “... debates, decision-making, and student assemblies” (Schulz et al., 2018, p. xvi). The 2016 and 2009 reports both demonstrate how pupils value participation in their education but their opportunities for decision-making and participation in their schools differ across countries (Schulz et al., 2018). Due to economic reasons, policy in Europe has focused on national competitiveness, resulting in funding cuts that are aimed at stimulating participatory citizenship (Hoskins et al., 2012).

How to teach through a thick notion of democracy continues to remain unclear (Collins et al., 2019), and this is apparent also in Norway. The UN and OECD have high ambitions for young peoples’ participatory competencies for democracy that are recurring in the renewed Norwegian curriculum implemented in 2020 (LK20) (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017; OECD, 2019). The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training states three overall interdisciplinary themes in the curriculum: sustainable development, democracy and citizenship, and public health and life skills.

Recent ICCS reports state that Norwegian youths possess knowledge of the principles and workings of democracy. Having citizens with a comprehensive understanding of democracy, including its regulations and limitations, is crucial. However, regarding democracy solely as a process of electing representatives and the adherence to majority rule reflects a narrow and thin notion of the concept (Barber, 2004). Research on teacher educators and pre-service teachers’ understanding of democracy in Norway has uncovered that their perception of democracy is defined as a structural way of organizing societies (Biseth et al., 2018; Biseth and Lyden, 2018; Eriksen, 2018). Although the importance of participation is acknowledged, the practical implications for such participation seem to be limited to formal bodies, such as students’ councils, which resemble the structural ways of governing a nation (Biseth and Lyden, 2018; Eriksen, 2018; Magerøy, 2022). The lack of practical implications of student participation is therefore apparent also in Norway.

A pupil survey is conducted each year from 5th grade through Upper Secondary School in Norway. The survey investigates the pupils’ experience regarding their teaching environment and schooling. The survey intends to improve Norwegian schools (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). The yearly reports from the survey often reveal the same results: the pupils mostly experienced well-being at school, motivation for school work

was largely mediocre, and the pupils’ experiences with co-determination and participation in their learning and schoolwork are reported to be low (Helland and Terje, 2005a,b; Furre et al., 2006; Skaar et al., 2008; Skaalvik et al., 2009; Wendelborg et al., 2011, 2012, 2017, 2018, 2019; Wendelborg, 2021; Wendelborg and Utmo, 2022). Pupils’ co-determination and participation have been repeated and recommended in every yearly report since 2004 but do not seem to be improving. At the same time, motivation for schoolwork is declining. The later reports demonstrate that the pupils’ stress impacts their well-being. The 2006 report concluded that schools appear to have developed a structure where achievement is considered superior to learning (Furre et al., 2006), indicating external motivation for learning. Educational researchers in Norway have expressed concern over the shift in school management priorities, as there seems to be a tendency for a transition from a learning-centered approach to an emphasis on achievement. Some have speculated that this shift may be attributed to national and international testing and comparison (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2013; Befring, 2022; Sjøberg, 2022). Testing and grading seem to be prioritized as the pupils move from 7th to 10th grade, and the pupils are given fewer opportunities to co-decide and influence their learning and evaluations (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2013; Wendelborg et al., 2018). The psychological theory of self-determination is highly critical to the educational systems’ use of external pressure, as external motivations’ positive effects on cognitive growth, academic success, and the learner’s well-being are questionable (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

As critical pedagogy assesses traditional schooling in a negative way, its criticisms refer to macro- and microstructures in power relations and society (Hammer, 2023). It is the microstructures of participation and democratic education which fall within the scope of this study, questioning:

1. What factors can affect pupils’ participation in class activities when the teaching is structured on autonomy-supportive teaching and learning?
2. How can an intervention based on pupils’ ability to choose for themselves impact their experience of ownership in school activities?

Democratic education has often been categorized as education *about*, *through*, and *for* democracy. Education *about* democracy is what we learn and teach about democracy, and learning *for* democracy is exercising the ability to respond in given circumstances (or, being prepared to act). Learning *through* democracy is closely linked to experiencing democratic praxis, not necessarily to being prepared for something in the future, but rather acknowledging the present and legal right (Barrett et al., 2018). This article’s theoretical and empirical foundation is centered on learning *through* democracy in the contextual situation of a singular class. Experiencing democracy and participation can result in societal changes over time, and this article suggests some future implications in its concluding section.

2 Teaching through democracy in a critical pedagogical landscape

Critical pedagogy offers a substantial critique of society, suggesting major changes in practical organization where education is essential

Abbreviations: ICCS, International Civic and Citizenship Education Study; IEA, Evaluation of Educational Achievements; LK20, The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion 2020; NESH, The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees; NSD, Norwegian Center for Research Data; NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology; OECD, The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; UN, United Nation.

for the construction of a more equitable society. The theory is extensive in its comments on large structures, and originates from the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (Porfilio and Ford, 2015). Although central, one intervention does not provide empirical data to comment on societal changes, but critical pedagogy also offers practical didactical methods of teaching democratically, wherein it highlights the importance of emancipation for the learner (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996).

Freire (1996) writings, regarded as seminal works in critical pedagogy, highlight the importance of education's ability to equip students with democratic competencies. Critical educators believe in humans' unique ability to act and be conscious participants in their own lives (Giroux, 2020; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). The learners themselves inhabit abilities to learn, develop, and grow if the contextual frames of faith and trust allow for such empowerment to occur (Freire, 2021). Freire suggested a dialogical approach to teaching, where the educator searches for the learner's point of view as a springboard for problem-solving. The students' ideas or values should direct and influence the teaching, so that it is experienced in relation to the learners' real-life challenges (Freire, 1996). The competency that is regarded as liberating is to facilitate a type of learning wherein the students feel that education is something they do, not something that is imposed on them, and is thus critical to a prescribed curriculum or standardization (Shor, 1993; Freire, 1996).

Freire does not see education as an independent act, but rather as an act of collective effort: "Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught" (Freire, 1996, p. 60). The Freirean pedagogy preresquires that the material learned is a collective effort, influencing and stimulating the teacher–learner relationship. Collectiveness is regarded as a factor in reducing the banking methods of teaching, where the teacher is the sole holder and definer of knowledge (Shor, 1993; Freire, 1996). hooks (1994) also presented a holistic perception of education in advocating teaching where the relational openness between the teacher and the learner is central. She claimed relatedness to the world and learner–teacher–peers is important for gaining familiarity and relatedness to knowledge and oneself, while also stimulating well-being throughout the process. hooks (2010) referred to motivation in education as a passion for reflection, claiming that such passion diminishes as pupils enter an educational system geared toward obedience and conformity. She criticized education for socializing learners into becoming similar to their peers—clones of each other, as it were—and not developing and stimulating their authenticity (hooks, 1994). Shor (1993) referred to Freire's criticism of traditional schooling by using the term "authority-dependence" as a consequence of students and teachers' learned passivity through many years in the education system.

Inspired by Ranci re (1991) reflections on how our education system decreases the students' ownership of learning while providing the roles of "the incompetent" and "the competent" with little room for negotiation, this study experiments with returning this ownership.

3 Is critical pedagogy relevant in Norwegian education?

Norway has a long tradition of public and free education, in which accessible quality education for all is greatly emphasized. Still, an

interconnected, globalized educational sector impacts national policy and educational discourse (M ller and Skedsmo, 2013; Bj rnsrud and Nilsen, 2021). Theorists have suggested that the neoliberal educational discourse focusing on assessment pressures and accountability is hampering the practical implications of democracy education (Hyslop-Margison and Ram rez, 2016; Karaba, 2016; Atkinson, 2017). This is visible through the OECD's influential testing and recommendations (Befring, 2022; Sj berg, 2022). International competition seems to have impacted what we regard education to be, and what quality education is supposed to look like (Bj rnsrud and Nilsen, 2021), with neglect of pupils' engagement in and through their learning, as pupils are expected to endure long hours of externally-assigned tasks, often with little consideration of their interests, needs, and values (Befring, 2022). The perception of education as a place where the learner comes to receive what is given by the teacher, not themselves operating as active agents of their learning, is therefore highly worth investigating. Critical pedagogy offers perspectives on how education can stimulate the learner's agency in cooperation with others, as well as the potential importance of change.

4 Method

Inspired by Hart (1992) ladder of participation, and children's right to participate—as stated in the UN (*Convention on the Rights of Children*, 1990), a student teacher and I constructed an intervention that considered some of the key concepts of motivational theory, such as learners' sense of choice, intrinsic motivation, and control over learning and goals (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Our aim was to stimulate the 12-year-old pupils' involvement in what they were learning, that is, stimulating participation as an element of learning through democracy. The intervention was a two-day experiment in which, on the first day, the pupils were given the opportunity to choose how to learn about the theme of human rights through either self-study, teacher-led learning, or projects in groups. On the second day, we expanded the options to include a thematic focus or what to learn. Before and after the intervention, the pupils answered a questionnaire on their previous experience with school participation, and their perception in this intervention. Seven months later, the pupils wrote unstructured comments about these 2 days.

While the 2 days were linked, on the first we gave the pupils three working method options and a pre-set theme (human rights). On the second, the structures were freer with no specific theme or method. Our aim was to introduce the pupils' self-determination in steps, gradually introducing and expanding their agency. The intervention was conducted in cooperation with a student teacher, here referred to as Elisabeth.

4.1 Participants

The intervention was conducted in a class with 18 pupils aged 12 and above. All of the pupils signed a written consent form (Backe-Hansen, 2009). The class was situated in a large primary school in a suburban area in Norway. The questionnaires indicated that the pupils had been trained in a traditional school context, often teacher-instructed but with occasional opportunities to co-decide throughout their previous schooling.

4.2 Data collection

This article is based on in-class questionnaires completed pre- and post-intervention, fieldnotes from the participatory observation, and unstructured comments by the pupils 7 months after the intervention.

4.2.1 Observation

Participatory observation has several benefits as it allows access to immediate responses, reactions, and actions (Tjora, 2021). The observation had a specific focus on active engagement and self-regulated learning. As we organized, initiated, and managed the intervention, the participatory approach allowed us to interact and gain an in-depth understanding of these situations. We took notes on what we saw that we experienced as essential for the pupil's ownership during the 2 days. But summing up the intervention through excessive notetaking at the end of day, was essential, as it was difficult to guide the pupils, observe and write at the same time. Discussions with the student teacher Elisabeth after the interventions were important in documenting the observations. The observational notes were messy and comparing notes provided a more organized perspective on singular situations that we regarded important for the projects aim.

The method was intrusive as the intervention was initiated by us as outsiders (rather than their regular teachers), but the pupils were in a familiar setting among established peers.

4.2.2 Questionnaires

The observational notes are supplied with the pupils' responses through the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. Both questionnaires consisted of 12 checkbox questions, and the pupils were instructed on not naming the questionnaires, underlining that answering was voluntary. Sixteen pupils filled out the questionnaires, and they could check several boxes where relevant. In the questionnaire before the intervention, the questions were on how they experienced their participation at school. They answered questions *on whether they felt free at school, if they were reluctant to disagree with the class or teacher, preferred working methods, and their previous encounters with co-determination at school.* The first questionnaire included one question where the pupils were asked: "How do you prefer to work with schoolwork?" The check box alternatives are presented in Figure 1. All the other questions had the check box alternatives "not

at all," "to a small extent," "to some extent," "to a large extent," and "to a very large extent."

In the questionnaire after the intervention, the questions were on how they experienced this intervention. The questions were on specifics, like *if the pupils felt the method was unclear, if they enjoyed the working method,* but also questioning the pupils on what they want in the future, like *if they want to decide more on what and how they learn at school.*

4.2.3 Unstructured comments

In addition, we wanted to see if the pupils would reply differently when we (as initiators) were not present but their class teacher in a 'normal' setting. Seven months after the intervention, we asked the class teacher to ask the pupils to freely write comments on the interventions. Sixteen pupils wrote short comments by hand (see Table 1). It was the class teacher that collected these comments.

4.3 Analysis

The data is analyzed through a process of constructionist analysis, as the aim was to "...highlight particular and contextually meaningful processes" (Marvasti, 2013, p. 361) that may have hampered or stimulated the pupils participation and ownership. To grasp these contextually responses, interpret what they may entail, and report situations occurring, the project aimed at exploring how the pupils responded. The observational notes were digitally re-written after completing the intervention, organized in two columns: *actions observed* and *own interpretation*. My interpretations of the situations, the observed actions, and the pupils' comments are included in the coding and categorization but visualized as different, to be aware of these differences. The observational notes were coded *in vivo* (213 codes) describing content or situations using the software system NVivo. Examples of codes are: *The pupils share knowledge while researching,* and *the pupils use their own free time to work.* These codes were organized thematically aiming for factors and processes that described, demonstrated, or explained the pupils' responses. Five factors were identified as having effect on their participation, and these were: *fun, relatedness to theme and peers, ambition, becoming an expert, and insecurity.*

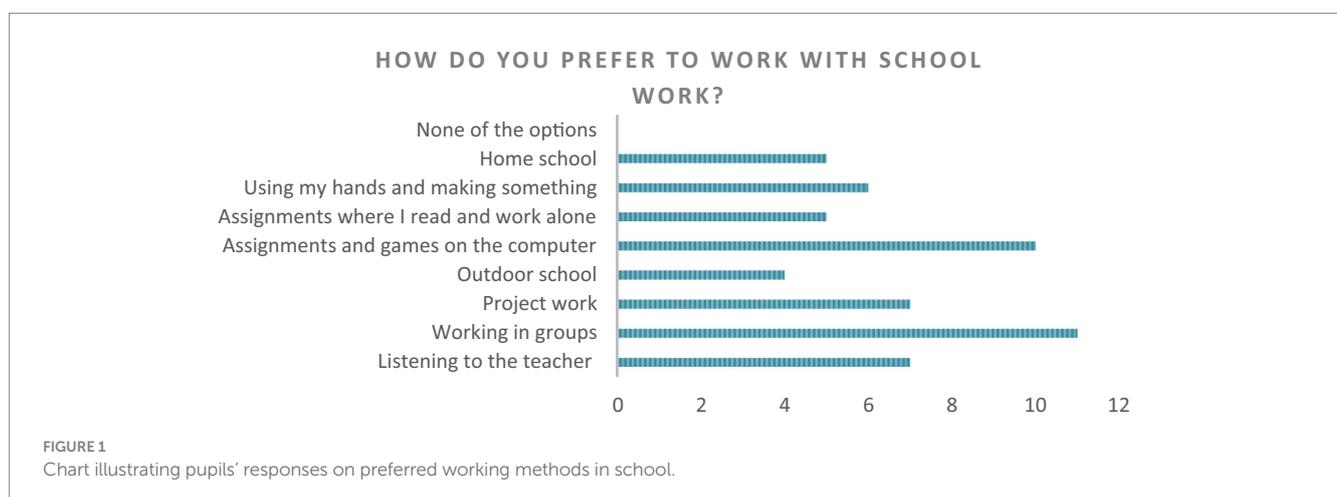


TABLE 1 The pupils' unstructured comments in Norwegian and translated to English, June 2022.

	Translated into English
1.	These days were the best, everyone was happy.
2.	Help! Come back!
3.	In all my time at school, this was the best day.
4.	It was extremely fun, I felt we worked a lot more because we were given much more freedom.
5.	Very good.
6.	It was a good day. It was an experience.
7.	It was a long time ago, so I do not remember much but it was pretty fun. I would say it was the best school week this year, a very nice experience and a very educational week.
8.	I liked that we were given the freedom to do the assignment. We got to choose how and everything like that. This made me more engaged. I liked it and wished for all days of school to be like that.
9.	We did more work because we had fun.
10.	It was fun.
11.	It was an interesting experience we learned a lot from.
12.	It was fun.
13.	It was a fun day that I will never forget.
14.	Very good.
15.	It was the best and the worst day of my [life] but mostly fun.
16.	My personal opinion on these 2 days is that I think this is a very good way to work, and I felt that I learned more than I normally do.

4.4 Ethical considerations

We specified to the pupils that answering the questionnaire would be voluntary and anonymous, and some of the pupils received assistance in reading the questions. The project was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2022), following the guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities (NESH guidelines) (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2021). The parents were informed of our study before the intervention, and the pupils signed a consent form.

Exposing the pupils to a study which may cause insecurity for some is problematic. Since the pupils took part in our intervention during their class on a regular school day, it may have been difficult for the pupils to choose not to participate. This ran counter to the intention of the project, as it was their free will and autonomy we sought to investigate. The social experiment of letting pupils freely choose with whom to cooperate could potentially magnify exclusion and bullying through the lack of structures and control. Through close observation and integration in and through the pupils' work,

we attempted to detect harmful behavior and guide the pupils to engage in friendly cooperation.

5 Results

The intervention lasted two full days in one class (see Table 2). On day one, the theme was human rights, but the working method was optional. On day two, the pupils could themselves decide what to learn and, to a certain degree, how.

5.1 Day one

Before introducing the intervention to the class, we had some physical activities and ball games. This allowed us to play with the pupils and let them see us play, and thus hopefully built rapport with them.

Back in the classroom, when the pupils were presented with the choices of the three working methods (alone, being taught by a teacher, or project work), they laughed. We understood that some of the pupils were so determined to do project work in groups that the other options seemed laughable. The groups seemed eager to create a product, and Elisabeth asked them if they planned to do background reading, to which the pupils responded that they did. They seemed, however, less interested in gathering information than creating a product.

In one of the groups, one of the pupils assumed a leading role. This pupil informed the others that first, they needed to research and read, asking me if they had to take notes. I said that they could decide themselves. After doing some reading, they shared information. At the end of day one, when discussing the day in a full class, one of the pupils commented that they enjoyed the unstructured talking and group discussions, not raising hands but spontaneously sharing what they learned.

Group A decided to make a podcast about human rights. They discussed the content, whether to include jokes, and how to organize themselves. They agreed on one signal if they wanted to speak, and another if they wanted to comment. One of the pupils in this group seemed passive and quiet. Another just continued to read, and when asked why, the pupil replied that they wanted to ensure that the information was correct. The one that took the leading role complimented the group for their efforts. One of the pupils laughed out loud while recording the podcast, disturbing the other pupils. The group dynamics seemed to change due to who assumed the informal leadership role. In one group, the informal leader seemed to be doing all the work and not including the others. The work seemed less organized when nobody was responsible for structuring, and some of the group members seemed to dislike or feel uncomfortable by this, while others seemed free to make jokes and act playfully. At the end of day one, some groups did not know what to do as they felt that the project was complete. This disturbed some of the other groups that had not finished their projects.

Group B did not manage to finish their film on child marriages. They had planned and recorded the film, but wanted to continue editing. This group returned on day two with the finished film, explaining to us that they had stayed up until midnight editing and completing the project. We watched the video together in the class on

TABLE 2 Illustration of the two-part intervention, conducted in 2022.

	Day one	Day two
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Introduction -Physical activity with different getting-to-know-you games. -Answer questionnaire. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -We introduced and exemplified two projects: <i>History of dinosaurs</i>, and <i>How physical activity can improve learning</i>. -We showed how the pupils could plan their project on a single sheet.
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The theme for the day was human rights, determined by the class teacher and syllabus. -Choose a method of working: alone, instructed by the teacher, or projects in groups. -No limitation on group size. The pupils organized their own groups. -Presenting their projects at the end of the day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pupils decided <i>what</i> to learn about without any restrictions. -Pupils decided <i>how</i> to learn. -Pupils completed a single-sheet plan (exemplified). -Maximum of three pupils in groups. - Presenting their projects at the end of the day.
Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group A: 6 pupils. Podcast on child marriage as a human rights violation. Group B: 6 pupils. Film of child marriage where the pupils were acting. Group C: 2 pupils. Poster where they listed their selection of the worst human rights violations. Group D: 2 pupils. Poster where they listed their selection of the most important human rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group A: 3 pupils. Digital book, film, and a Kahoot quiz. History of the Ford car. Group B: 3 pupils. Cardboard poster on methods of torture in the Middle Ages. Group C: 2 pupils. Cardboard poster on the Balkan Wars. Group D: 2 pupils. Cardboard poster on the Roman Empire. Group E: 2 pupils. Cardboard poster and a Kahoot quiz on the Second World War. Group F: 3 pupils. Cardboard poster on the triangular slave trade. Pupil G: 1 pupil. Cardboard poster on clothes in the age of Vikings.

Sixteen pupils participated: aged 12–13 years old.

day two and were impressed by the pupils' acting and filmmaking skills. Finishing the video was the group members' initiative, as we gave no instructions to work at home.

After day one, Elisabeth and I discussed the interventions and decided to frame the work on day two using these guidelines: groups should consist of a maximum of three pupils, all the groups needed a

plan before starting the task, and the pupils had to present their work at the end of the day. In so doing, we hoped to structure and facilitate the pupils' working conditions without compromising their agency.

5.2 Day two

After presenting the plan for the day and exemplifying how the pupils could plan and structure their work, they completed a simple form to structure their day. In the form, the pupils had to identify four things they wanted to learn about in their thematic area of choice and write a schedule. Two of the groups were hindered from participating in the information and planning part at the beginning of the day (Groups C and F). Their work seemed less structured and, in Group C, the pupils were frustrated before deciding on what to focus. After discussing and sharing ideas among themselves, they chose to focus on a personal area of interest: the Balkan Wars. The reason for choosing this thematic project was that the pupils wanted their peers to learn about these European wars, as they had the impression that their peers were unfamiliar with them. Group F seemed less stressed about what to focus on and decided that their project would be a drawn map of the triangular slave trade. This last group was somewhat quiet and seemed comfortable drawing and coloring a large poster.

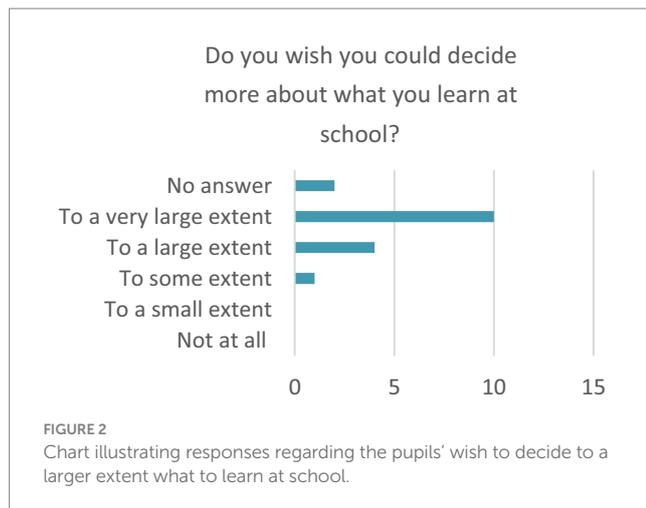
Some of the pupils needed to discuss and share ideas with us. However, although we provided ideas, all of the pupils ultimately chose ideas which had not come from us. This process of discussing thematic and methodical approaches to learning was interesting, and it seemed that, though the pupils appreciated the discussion, they ultimately wanted to decide themselves.

All the pupils chose inter- or transdisciplinary history subjects as themes upon which to focus. Interdisciplinarity is characterized by the use of different tools from several disciplines in problem solving (Koritzinsky, 2021), whereas trans-disciplinarity further draws on knowledge from actors outside the learning institution (Nenseth et al., 2010; Biseth et al., 2022). Demonstrating examples of projects at the beginning of the day or listening to peer discussions may have impacted their thematic choices. The pupils organized themselves, and their projects were diverse and complex.

In some of the groups, occasional disagreements arose as they accused each other's potential lack of effort, or disagreements on focus or tasks. Still, the youths were well organized. The pupils needed help printing pictures for posters, finding materials, or guidance through discussing findings or methods. There was much activity in the classroom and the pupils seemed engaged in their work. One pupil said during the day: "Before you came, we had no freedom,"¹ which seemed like an emotional response to the method. We could hear how the pupils asked each other questions related to the project and shared information through discussions. Some of the pupils continued to discuss their projects during the breaks. Although the pupils seemed engaged, one of them expressed that they enjoyed the method but would have preferred fewer structures, like they had on day one.

Group A, which was learning about the history of Ford, had high ambitions for their work. They planned to read and research, and make several products, such as a digital book and a film, expressing:

¹ The authors' translation of the quote: "Før dere kom hadde vi ingen frihet."



“We lost our concentration yesterday but now we know that we need to stay focused.”² Group B, working on torture methods in the Middle Ages, made a poster but spent some time rehearsing the presentation. This group borrowed pupils from other groups to listen and comment on their rehearsal, and to hold the poster while they presented. Discussing the method with the pupils, one of them said: “I have learned that school can be fun,”³ while another added: “Basically, everyone liked it.”⁴ One of the pupils seemed to realize that they themselves had done “all the work,” accusing Elisabeth and me of laziness, further commenting that all this work had made them learn a lot.

5.3 Questionnaire results

The pre-intervention questionnaire results show that most of the pupils were satisfied with how they learn at school, and the methods used in the classroom seemed to fit their general preferences. Most of the pupils preferred group and project work, in addition to games and assignments on the computer. Only a few pupils preferred to work alone, only listen to the teacher, or be homeschooled (see Figure 1). Five pupils responded that they did not feel they could contribute much to deciding the lessons at school, while 4 answered that they could do so to a large or very large extent. 8 of the 16 pupils responded that they had limited opportunities to co-decide what to learn, while 7 felt they had these opportunities to a large extent. Thus, the pupils' responses seemed to point in different directions, as they experienced the opportunity to participate differently.

The pupils commented on the intervention after it had occurred. The results show that they enjoyed the two-day intervention, and the majority reported that they were engaged by the opportunity to decide on the working methods themselves. In addition, most of the pupils

reported that they wanted more opportunities to co-decide on how and what to learn (see Figures 2, 3).

6 Discussing the five factors that affected the pupils' participation

The discussion is organized into five sections, namely having fun, relatedness to theme and peers, ambition, becoming an expert, and insecurity. It is important to consider that the pupils' responses to these activities may have been affected by a multiple of reasons in addition to the ones presented here. As our aim was to investigate their ownership, and reactions to this ownership, there are many levels of human reaction that is hard to see, report and be aware of. For instance, the attractiveness of doing something differently, or having people from outside the school, may have affected the pupils' reactions, feelings, and expressions.

6.1 The serious importance of having fun

In our intervention, we observed pupils being engaged and involved in their work. Their enthusiasm was striking, as they were having fun working. Fun in school may seem superficial, but the pupils excitement seemed key to their participation, and therefore became impossible to ignore as a driving force for active engagement.

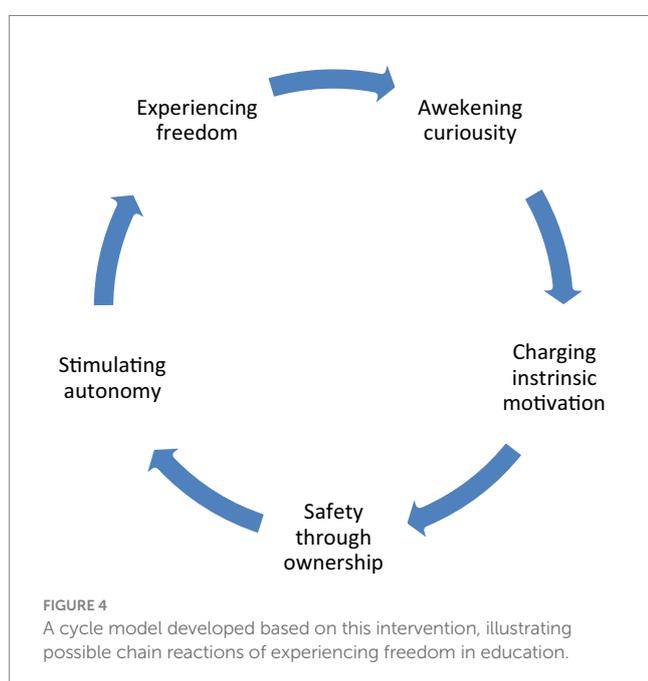
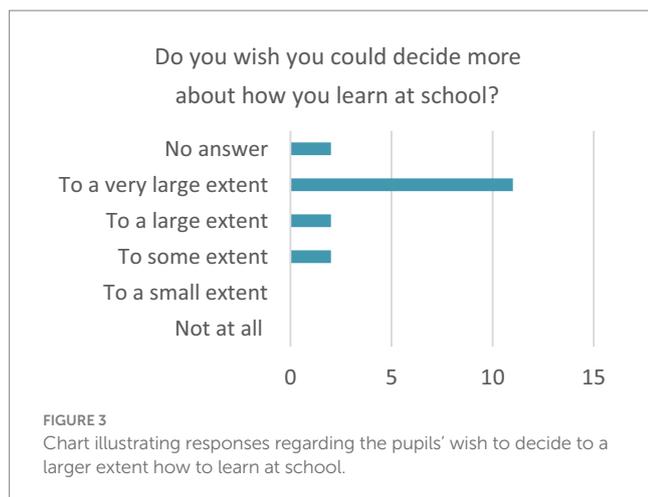
At one point during the last day, a pupil called my name across the classroom: “This has been the best day at school, ever. Can you please come back so we can do this every day? Everyone in class loved this.” The excitement this pupil expressed was emotional. Forcing fun can disrupt its flexibility and, hence, its very nature (Fine and Corte, 2017). Having fun in the classroom was not one of our intended aims, but it became an unexpected component. hooks (2003) heavily criticized the authoritarian classroom because the individual in such a context is unable to express and shape the educational process, further underlining that education can be “magical” if constructed as an act of freedom. Organized fun can disrupt the fun itself, as it entails a power relationship between the initiator and receiver (Fincham, 2016). Furthermore, although there was a role classification in this classroom with us as teachers deciding what to do, we still could catch a glimpse of the emotional response which presented itself when allowing the pupils' preferences to dominate. “Emotions become involved when situations allow for creative and spontaneous action” (Kidder, 2006, p. 32), and such spontaneous action demands ownership of the task in question because, by asking permission, the freedom of being creative becomes limited. Thus, having fun carries a potential for participation, and could thus offer an opportunity for leveling hierarchy.

Our questionnaires showed that the pupils enjoyed the opportunity to decide on what and how to learn. In addition, most of the pupils reported that they wanted to have the opportunity to co-decide to a larger extent. Having fun can be one way of expressing inner motivation, as fun is prompt pleasure, often in connection with other pupils. Having fun through the enjoyment of a task can be an example of intrinsic motivation, and the pupils demonstrated fun and enjoyment through the work they performed, which corresponded with their responses on the final questionnaire (see Figures 3, 4).

2 My translation of the quote: “I går var. vi ikke så konsentrerte, men nå har vi lært at vi må jobbe konsentrert.”

3 My translation of the quote: “Jeg har lært at skole er gøyere enn jeg hadde tenkt.”

4 My translation of the quote: “Basically alle likte det!”



6.2 Relatedness to theme and peers

The differences between the pupils' projects made comparisons difficult as they each had their own thematic and methodological form. Why they chose these exact themes to investigate was unclear and outside the scope of this study. Some of the groups had a personal interest in choosing as they did, but mostly this seemed not to be the case. Rather, the personal interest in their projects seemed to grow as they worked. The group investigating torture in the Middle Ages was especially intrigued by the information they gathered, causing curiosity and interest from their peers because of the morbid and fascinating facts and illustrations they discovered. It was important for us to provide support, but at the same time allow their interest and personal preferences to prevail—which also appeared to be important for the pupils themselves. Freire (2021) emphasized trust as essential in democratic education, an element that might be necessary for pupils to discover their preferences, strengths, and values, and is referred to as one's authenticity. The choice of theme and methods

visualized their perspectives, allowing their values and ideas to take a central position.

All of the pupils chose group work on day one, and a large majority also did so on day two. In our questionnaire, 5 pupils answered that one of the preferred methods of learning was reading and writing alone, and 11 pupils answered that one of their preferences was working in groups. Their preferred choice of group work resonates with the motivational factor of relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The psychological need of being a part of something with others, as described by the self-determination theory, could potentially explain the pupils' choice. The Freirean pedagogy underlines the importance of learning as a mutual effort, and listening to the pupils' discussions when conducting research and sharing their findings resonates with this collective perspective. The group's interaction in shaping and developing their project deviated from a banking model of education (Freire, 1996), as it was *their* common efforts and ideas, not those of the teacher, that constructed the process. Thus, the learner–teacher contradiction referred to in the Freirean pedagogy transformed into a situation where both the teacher and the pupils became learners together, collectively investigating the knowledge. In this project, the pupils facilitated what and how to learn, including us as teachers in their discoveries through discussions and presentations. Through the process of cooperating, the pupils negotiated and adapted to the social conventions in the group, bringing the dimension of a “holistic curriculum,” a pedagogy aimed at social skills and empowerment (O'Shea, 2006, pp. 67–68). As the pupils collaborated for a common purpose, the element of competition in learning might have been reduced. According to Ranci re (1991) and Giroux (2020), diminishing competition in education is essential for the individual and common good.

6.3 Ambition

The pupils were ambitious when they could decide what and how to learn. They did not seem to take the easier path to finish the project, but instead had multiple ideas. One of the groups wanted to produce a digital book, a film, and a Kahoot quiz. The extensive plans the pupils made for their projects meant that several groups had little time and had to rush at the end of the day. The pupils' ambitious projects appeared driven by intrinsic motivation, as they did not aim for finishing but endorsed a self-imposed complex process, as opposed to an external motivation which causes us to take the shortest path, as it is finishing the job, rather than enjoying the process, which matters most (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

The pupils' seemed engaged by what and how to present their projects, but listening to their discussions indicated that engagement in information gathering also developed as they researched and read. As one of the Ford group members expressed: “Ford was brilliant! He increased wages by \$5 so the workers at the factory could afford their own cars. He may have lost 10 billion by increasing the salaries, but he probably made 20 billion. He may have been a Nazi, but this was brilliant!”⁵ The pupil shared information about Henry Ford with

⁵ My translation of the quote: “Ford var. genial! Han  kte l nna med 5 dollar s  arbeiderne p  fabrikkens hadde r d til egen bil. Han tapte kanskje 10 milliarder p     ke l nna, men tjente sikkert 20 milliarder. Han var. kanskje nazist, men dette var. genialt!”

the other members of the group, obviously discovering something that they had found interesting. The research phase of their projects allowed for the projects to grow and develop in unintended ways. Their projects seemed not to be goal-oriented, but rather process-oriented educational journeys. Seeing education as a process of growth, without another aim than itself, facilitates "...the optimal situation for human cultivation," according to [Biesta \(2021\)](#), p. 31.

At the end of day two, one of the pupils expressed that: "We have learned a lot, these 2 days. We have learned an awful lot!"⁶ The pupil further commented that they had been "doing all the work," which indicates that they were actively involved in all parts of their learning. The pupil's realization that they, not the teacher, had done all of the work was expressed humorously. [Freire \(1996\)](#) emphasized that education should liberate the learner from oppression through a process of becoming aware of the unequal distribution of power. In addition, both the above quote and the unstructured comment 7 months after the intervention (see [Table 1](#)) demonstrated that the pupils themselves had the experience of learning "an awful lot." It should be noted that what they learned falls outside of the scope of this study. Interestingly, the pupils experienced learning, which may indicate an experience of mastery in their schooling, or self-efficacy to self-regulate their learning ([Bandura, 2018](#)). As a sense of self-efficacy is essential to participation, these experiences can be fundamental for the pupils' motivation and sense of relatedness to their education.

6.4 Becoming an expert

On day one, a pupil in one group investigated whether the information they had gathered was correct. The pupil demonstrated responsibility through this act, systematically checking the project's background information. Initiating fact-checking indicates the seriousness of the task, or perhaps a genuine interest in the theme. Still, as most of the pupils demonstrated an eagerness to produce something, this pupil showed a thorough approach. As this pupil assumed the role of a researcher, others adopted more leading positions, and most of the pupils appeared eager to produce something. This division of roles indicated how they explored their strengths and preferences for what to do.

The presentations on day two seemed to suggest that the pupils had gained ownership of their projects, as they were freely answering questions during and after presenting. The pupils were seemingly not striving to find the right answer, but rather reflecting and complementing each other while responding. It appeared that the presenters knew that they were the experts of this specific knowledge, joyfully sharing it with us. Possibly because they had been discussing the projects with us, it seemed that they were aware that their newly-discovered facts were unfamiliar to us, and they were the ones with updated knowledge. Central to critical pedagogy is the learner's ownership of education as essential for developing democratic competencies. According to the critical stance ([Freire, 1996](#)), participating and influencing knowledge production in

cooperation with others develops subjectness and a voice of one's own.

As education has primarily focused on qualification, with socialization and subjectification as positive bi-products, [Biesta \(2021\)](#) urged for the reprioritization of the educational aim, where subjectification should gain importance. How to be a subject, or to develop subjectness, is perhaps a more difficult aim. However, interpreting subjectness as having a voice, and being able to share and negotiate with others, is essential. The pupils in this intervention expressed their expert knowledge in the thematic field of choice, hence potentially exercising the ability to participate with a part of their authentic self, in cooperation with others.

6.5 Insecurity

The autonomy-supportive projects made some pupils passive, much to the irritation of their peers. [hooks \(2010\)](#) explained that passivity can be caused by internalized obedience, which can occur if pupils have not experienced education as a place to exercise their freedom.

Leaving projects in the hands of pupils can increase the possibility of being overlooked, hence not sufficiently guided for the task ([Engesbak et al., 2021](#)). Freire's ambition to equip all learners with sufficient democratic competency may not occur if the pupils are left on the wayside, or if they experience disinterest in working and learning. Although wanting the pupils to be engaged and to learn, [Ranci re \(1999\)](#) stressed the importance of dissent for democracy. Accordingly, the pupils' choice of not working could itself be a learning moment. Experiencing freedom might prerequisite moments of unwanted actions, experiencing the limits of one's own agency, and testing the boundaries of freedom. Pupils' unwanted actions can, therefore, initiate problematic dilemmas for teachers, as adolescents' withdrawal can disturb peers but might for some be essential for exploring identity and expanding agency.

[hooks \(1994\)](#) underlined the importance of acknowledging everyone's presence, so doing this for pupils can be a pedagogical tool to regulate and direct learning and behavior, as acknowledging presence is also to signal the pupils' importance and that of their efforts. The method's intention to stimulate the pupils' self-initiated progress may have resulted in a sense of abandonment. The process' briefness did not supply enough time to see if they developed the self-confidence and courage necessary to initiate a project themselves, as well as whether they became familiar with this method of working. The method opened a space for the pupils' self-regulated leadership and hence power imbalance, as they exercised informal leadership and sometimes dominated each other. Such power imbalance among peers can lead to insecurity and lack of participation.

Being a part of the class as a community may be essential for preventing the pupils' feelings of being forgotten ([O'Shea, 2006](#)), but our lack of close acquaintance with the pupils was an obstacle in understanding the individual reasons for not being engaged or involved. The project might have caused insecurity, as it may have required confidence and motivation to be involved. As an indicator influencing the pupil's participation, passivity is a hindrance in practicing autonomy and participation. Some pupils might need, to a larger extent than others, support from a competent other, as such

⁶ My translation of the quote: "Disse to dagene har vi l rt mye. Vi har l rt sjukt mye!"

guidance might stimulate future self-regulation. Vygotsky (1978), p. 57 claimed that “An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one,” explaining a development that occurs at two levels: first through interaction with others, then internally in the child, thus highlighting the importance of a sense of belonging to the learning community.

7 Conclusion

This study of a 2-day intervention in a class of 12-year-olds has attempted to investigate factors that affect pupils’ participation in class activities when structuring the teaching and learning as supportive of autonomy. In addition, the study has examined how pupils’ participation and ability to choose the content of their learning impacts their sense of educational ownership.

Through our intervention, we observed which factors affected the pupils’ participation. These factors were that the pupils were having fun and enjoying the process of learning. As excitement for learning may be dependent on flexibility and freedom, a structured process of education could ultimately strangle the core of pupils’ engagement through its framing. Educational research has frequently suggested stringent methods of best practice, but perhaps ignored the importance of freedom and flexibility in the classroom. Further, more research is needed to investigate flexibility as a strategy for excitement and involvement.

The level of ambition indicated that the pupils appreciated the process, as they not only self-inflicted complexity and challenges, but seemed eager to do so. The pupils also demonstrated ownership of the thematic field of their projects, and their participation seemed to be affected by the fact that they became “experts” in their chosen field of interest and could educate peers and teachers on the content of their learning. The cooperation in the groups seemed to be a motivational factor in their participation, and several pupils assumed leading roles by distributing tasks and regulating the others. Such self-organizing can cause a situation where the pupils argue. Although there was indeed space for dissent—as the pupils could argue and discuss freely—hierarchical structures emerged in the groups. A few of the pupils became insecure by the unstructured model of learning, which might have caused them to become passive in their work and projects. The intervention seemed to have provided experience with ownership in their learning because the pupils acted in a self-regulatory manner, organizing themselves in planning for activities.

Critical pedagogy contends that education, which prioritizes measurement and treats learners as passive recipients of knowledge, is a form of oppression, and instead emphasizes the importance of learners’ empowerment and active involvement in developing their voices (Aliakbari and Faraji, 2011). Dewey (2018) claimed that the educational aim must be produced by the learners themselves to preserve intrinsic motivation and purposeful democratic experiences. The critical stance also suggests that implications from an educational transformation result in major societal changes, such as the destruction of power hierarchies and emancipation of “the oppressed” (Freire, 1996). This study’s findings were gathered from a two-part intervention in one class, and although it investigated didactical methods described by critical pedagogies, we cannot predict the larger implications of these pupils’ participation at school. We did however

hear that, in the wake of this intervention, the pupils demanded more projects where they could decide the content of their learning, resulting in similar projects. Elisabeth, who had talked to the class teacher some weeks after the intervention, said: “The pupils were so excited by the opportunity to decide themselves, so that was something [the class teacher] heard repeatedly.”⁷ In so doing, the pupils demonstrated having gained experience as to how education can be different, and knowledge on how to have thematic and methodological agency.

Being offered the possibility to be engaged in one’s own learning, and operating as a participatory agent through education, can be done in multiple ways. This intervention provides reflections and one example on how to activate pupils. We gave the pupils the practical possibilities of co-determination, but more implicit methods are feasible. Co-determination is dependent on relational trust between the learner and the educator, as it prerequisites collaboration where the educators can facilitate the inclusion of the learner, which is an opportunity the learner must grasp. Hence, a respectful and considerate relationship can offer and provide space for the learner’s participatory activation.

The pupils’ ambitious projects in this intervention indicated a passion for what they were learning and doing. It would be hard to imagine that the pupils were merely fortunate with their thematic choices. Instead, it seemed far more plausible that self-determination made such passion appear regardless of theme. We need more knowledge and practical experiences on how to stimulate pupils’ partaking competencies, both for their well-being and motivation, but also due to our need for citizens familiar with participating.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants’ legal guardians/next of kin because the project did not aim specifically at studying individuals, but collective responses to the intervention. In so, the study was not a study of the pupils but how a pedagogical approach worked in a classroom. The pupils and guardians were informed of the study, and the students signed a written consent form. They were the age of 12. The ethics of informing the parents/guardians, and collecting written consent from the pupils,

⁷ My translation of the quote: “Elevene var jo ganske hypa på at de skulle få være med å bestemme. Så den fikk hen [kontaktlæreren] kjørt seg på».

were discussed with The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) prior to the study.

Author contributions

SM: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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