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Participating—or Being Part of an Organizational Change: Narratives of Participation Related to School Closures to Reduce School Segregation

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Abstract

The mission of all primary schools includes offering all pupils educational quality and equality. Municipalities struggle with the negative consequences of school segregation, and some local councils decide to implement extensive changes in their school organization to offer all pupils equal opportunities. This study analyzes the experiences of staff and students when a local council implemented organizational changes to reduce the negative consequences of school segregation. A narrative analysis of documentation from the education authority and interviews with pupils and school staff were used to understand the perspectives of staff and pupils. There was strong support from the staff for implementing the changes but also strong criticism of how these changes were carried out. One conclusion is that municipalities implementing similar changes need to plan for the whole process and the participation of pupils and school staff in a systematic way.

Résumé

Toutes les écoles primaires ont pour mission d'offrir à tous leurs élèves un enseignement de qualité qui soit équitable. Les municipalités luttent contre les conséquences négatives de la ségrégation scolaire et certains conseils locaux ont décidé de mettre en œuvre des changements importants dans l'organisation de leurs écoles afin d'offrir des chances égales à tous les élèves. Cette étude analyse les points de vue du personnel et des élèves lorsqu'un conseil local a mis en œuvre des changements organisationnels pour réduire les conséquences négatives de la ségrégation scolaire. Une analyse nar-

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rative de documents provenant de l'autorité éducative et d'entretiens avec les élèves et le personnel de l'école a été menée pour comprendre les perspectives du personnel et des élèves. Le personnel a fortement soutenu la mise en œuvre des changements, mais en même temps il a fortement critiqué la manière dont ces changements ont été effectués. Une conclusion à retenir est que les municipalités qui mettent en œuvre des changements similaires devraient planifier l'ensemble du processus de manière systématique tout en assurant la participation des élèves et du personnel de l'école dans cette planification.

Keywords / Mots clés : educational quality, equality, narrative analysis, primary school, school segregation, narrative analysis / qualité de l'éducation, égalité, analyse narrative, école primaire, ségrégation scolaire

Introduction

> *Perhaps this participation process should have started years ago when it became clear that [integration] might not be working so well. How should we approach this in the city so that all young people can integrate with each other and no one is singled out? Because I don't think they've had any influence over this [process], and I think it could have been handled differently.*
>
> *—School staff participant*

School segregation is a widespread global issue that is closely linked to economic and social inequality reinforcing divisions between different groups in society (Benito, Alegre, & Gonzàlez-Balletbò, 2014; Musterd, 2020). Thus, politicians at various levels often attempt to tackle school segregation through educational reform (Osman & Lund, 2022). The teacher in the quote above works at a school with major socio-economic challenges, where nearly 100 percent of the students have a migration background and the academic achievement is low. Local politicians decided to address this by closing the schools and offering pupils and teachers places at other schools. The long-term goal of the initiated changes was to reduce segregation and increase participation in society for the concerned pupils. But how did pupils and school staff experience participation in the actual change processes that followed the decision? This study focuses on changes in a municipal school organization aimed to reduce the negative consequences of school segregation and the way pupils and staff experienced these changes.

All children have the right to educational quality and equality, regardless of socio-economic family background or place of residence (Council of Europe, 2021; SFS 2010:800, 2010; UNICEF, 1989). In the *Swedish Education Act*, it is stated: "One endeavor must be to compensate for differences in the children's and pupils' conditions to assimilate the education … Everyone, regardless of geographic residence and social and economic conditions, must have equal access to education in the school system" (SFS 2010:800, 2010, Chapter 1 §4, §8). In recent decades, however, school segregation in Sweden has increased significantly and pupils with similar backgrounds and socio-economic status attend the same schools (Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019). Family background has become increasingly important for determining aca-

demic achievement, which may affect opportunities later in life (Böhlmark, Holmlund, & Lindah, 2016). Pupils with a migration background or with parents with a low level of education face increasing difficulties in qualifying for upper secondary school as the schools struggle to provide diverse students with equal education (Grönqvist & Niknami, 2020). This increases students' risk of long-term unemployment and social and economic vulnerability (Wilson & Bridge, 2019). To live up to the goals of the *Education Act*, municipalities try to counteract the negative effects of school segregation by increasing resources or making changes to school organizations (Osman & Lund, 2022; Trumberg, Arneback, Bergh, & Jämte, 2024).

There are high expectations from the public and political decision-makers for the educational system and schools to solve the issue of segregation. However, it is important to consider how the change processes are experienced by those primarily affected by them, such as pupils and teachers. The overall aim of this study is to analyze narratives of participation during the reorganization of a municipal school organization, which is intended to reduce school segregation and increase equality for the pupils. The following research questions will guide the work:

> What narratives of participation are expressed in the education authority's documentation?
>
> How do pupils and school staff describe their experiences of the process and what narratives of participation do they express related to this?

Related research

Organizations, including schools, must constantly react to changing conditions and implementing changes. These changes can be planned or initiated as a reaction to an emerging situation. They can be small and targeted, such as implementing a new work process or a new pedagogical approach, or large and comprehensive, such as restructuring the entire organization (Palmer, Dunford, & Buchanan, 2022). In the literature concerning change processes, the employees' participation and commitment to the change are emphasized as decisive for the outcome (Lines, 2004). The reason why many change initiatives do not achieve the desired results is a lack of experienced participation, which often leads to resistance among employees (Warrick, 2023). Yilmaz and Kilicoglu (2013) stress that resistance can have different causes, for example, fear of change, uncertainty, a feeling of losing control, or the perceived consequences or aim of the change. Other reasons for resisting change can include insufficient communication and information or a lack of involvement, support, and clarity from management. When people do not feel involved in the decision-making process, they can feel neglected (Jones & Brazzel, 2014; Wittig, 2012). Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, and Topolnytsky (2007) show that commitment to the change itself is more important than loyalty and commitment to the organization. Too many recurring changes can be another reason for resistance, and Abrahamson (2004) argues that staff often do not get a fair chance to implement one change before the next one arrives and hardly anyone knows what to do or why.

Schools are similar to other organizations but also have unique characteristics. The objectives of schools are complex and involve pupils' learning, a multifaceted task that requires constant awareness of pupils' varying and evolving conditions and

development. Life at school is characterized by constant change; the school year has different routines and teachers work with "moving matter." They must constantly adapt to the different circumstances and learning processes of pupils and groups. These "bottom-up changes" where school staff relate to and adjust teaching and actions to meet the needs of pupils are part of teachers' professional work. Teachers are generally well prepared to handle this kind of internal change and experience it as a stimulating and a natural part of their professional life (Hargreaves, 2004). However, projects meant to bring about change are often initiated from the outside and top-down, by local or state government and political decisions, e.g. changes in catchment area of schools, new curricula, grading systems, standardized tests, or the implementation of new pedagogical models. External top-down reforms have increased and become more comprehensive, as politicians seek to use schools to solve other societal problems, and market forces have an increased influence over the education sector (Fullan, 2016). Teachers and principals must increasingly react and cope with external top-down changes, rather than being architects or initiators of change. This is a shift from the traditional roles of educators who initiate, design, and lead change based on personal and professional-pedagogical competencies and beliefs and affects both self-image and professional self-confidence and, in the long run, the entire education sector (Ball, 2003).

Frequently, changes, both internal and external, require personal changes for the people affected. To succeed and not just become words on paper, the balance between internal, external, and personal change needs according to Goodson (2001) to be negotiated. He argues that change and reform should be a two-way process between the school and its broader context. It is essential to consider teachers' personal beliefs and motivations. Educational change is most effective when it draws on these personal commitments for inspiration and aligns with teachers' personal and professional goals. Reforms should also support and empower teachers to take ownership of the changes (Goodson, 2001). In the literature on changes in schools, a common theme is that top-down initiatives do not reach the intended goals and have difficulty functioning over time (Fullan, 2000). Although management literature repeatedly emphasizes the importance of staff understanding the reasons for changes, ensuring staff is involved in the process, that the process is clear and transparent, that staff receives sufficient information, and that management is responsive throughout the process (Mento, Jones, & Dirndorfer, 2002), many educational reforms do not adequately consider these realities and thus do not turn out as expected (Hargreaves, 2004; Murphy, 2020). One of the main reasons for this failure to adopt change is that many reforms in the educational sector are implemented and carried out from above in the form of top-down changes that the personnel concerned are only to implement without the possibility of influence (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2020). Murphy (2020) believes that politicians often become preoccupied with the goal of the reforms and do not pay much attention to either the internal or external context or how the change process is to be implemented. According to Hargreaves (2004), teachers are generally positive toward changes that they perceive as self-initiated, even if the change has its origin in legislation. Hargreaves concludes that the important thing is how changes are implemented and that they are included in design and conduct.

Theory

This study examines how pupils and staff experience a change process, with a central focus on the concept of participation, meaning the act of being involved in something. Participation and the experience of being involved are generally viewed positively, as they suggest shared responsibility and active engagement. Participation requires both commitment and the opportunity to channel that commitment effectively (Gustavsson, 2015). Additionally, the concept of participation is linked to aspects of belonging and identity. Participation is a normative and democratic endeavor in many contexts, also in working life, where it has been shown to contribute to healthier employees and better-functioning workplaces (Abildgaard, Hasson, von Thiele Schwarz, Løvseth, Ala-Laurinaho, & Nielsen, 2018). In both EU regulations and national legislation, it is established that employees must be involved in both business development and their work situation (SFS 1976:580, 1976; SFS 1977: 1160, 1977). Increased commitment and knowledge, when numerous voices and experiences are highlighted, can lead to a better working life for employees as well as for companies and society in general. But what does participation mean in relation to working life during changes in workplaces? Abildgaard et al. (2018) designed a model for analyses of dimensions of participation in work environment interventions, which focuses on participation in relation to: 1) the content of the intervention; 2) the process of implementing it; 3) degree of involvement, i.e., direct versus indirect; and 4) the goal. The parts are described as dimensions for analysis in different types of changes in workplaces. In change processes, the dimensions' content and process are linked. Many times, employees are involved in the process, but cannot influence the content or the goal—that decision has been made by others. Point three concerns the prerequisites for participation, whether participation is via representatives or with everyone being directly involved. The fourth dimension deals with participation as an end in itself or a means to other ends. These dimensions (content, process, directness, and goal) of participation in change processes have been used to analyze the current change process, which is the focus of this article. The dimensions contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what participation in a change process at a workplace can entail.

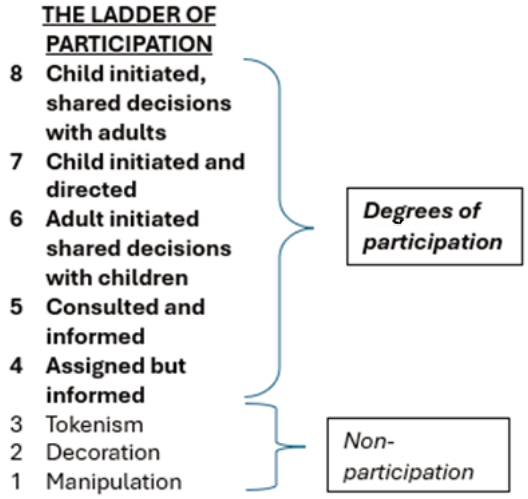
This study also concerns pupils who have a special position: they are obliged by law to attend school, they are not employed nor of legal age, but have guardians who are responsible for them. However, they have the right to participate in decisions that concern them; this is established in both school legislation and the curriculum (SFS 2010:800, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022) The school must, according to the *Education Act* (SFS 2010:800, 2010), both convey and embody democratic values. Hart (1992) points out that we cannot expect children to become responsible adults and democratic citizens if they are not empowered to take on greater responsibility. Since 2020, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) is part of Swedish law. Article 12 states that:

> 1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her 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. (UNICEF, 1989, Article 12)

It is not enough just to listen to the child; the child's views must be given importance, taken into account, and given feedback. Those who make decisions must inform the child about how the child's views have been considered, what balances have been struck in relation to other interests, and why/how the child's best interests have been considered in the current processes. That children have the right to be listened to also means that children must be given the opportunity to question and influence the analysis of the results. A model for analyzing children's participation is Hart's (1992) "Ladder of Participation" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hart's "Ladder of Participation"



Source: Hart, 1992, p. 9

In the bottom three steps, the children are not participating. They participate in contexts or processes completely controlled by adults. The children do not understand the purpose of the activity and they are involved because it looks good, or their participation is symbolic and serves the adults' agenda. In Step 4, they have received information but are not given the opportunity to be active. In Step 6, the children are allowed to influence matters genuinely, and in the preceding steps, the children themselves are initiators and are listened to on the same terms as adults. Step 6 is the level that can be equated with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Abildgaard et al.'s (2018) and Hart's (1992) models for participation will be used as a lens to analyze narratives of participation during the reorganization of a municipal school organization, intended to reduce school segregation and increase equality for the pupils.

Method

The study is based on analysis of official documents concerning the planned changes and interviews with pupils and school staff. The documents consist of a communication plan and the minutes of meetings at the administrative level and of the investigation conducted by the municipal education authority, which formed the basis of the political decision to close two schools and relocate pupils and staff to other schools in the municipality. All are public documents; the investigation is published on the municipality's website and minutes from education authority meetings have been requested from the education authority.

Interviews with pupils and school staff were conducted before and after the school closures—some individually, others in groups. The interviews with pupils concerned how they perceived their everyday life in school, social relations, and learning, and their thoughts about changing school before and after the implementation. The interviews

(see Table 1) with school staff focused on experiences of processes related to the school closures, their work on inclusion, and identified needs of competence development.

Table 1. Overview of data

	Before closing the schools	**After closing the schools**
Official documents	Investigation of school segregation in the municipality and proposal for reorganization of school organization (1 document) Minutes of meetings at the administrative level (8 documents) Communication plan (1 document	
Interviews with pupils	18 interviews; 21 pupils at closing schools	19 interviews: 40 pupils at receiving schools
Interviews with school staff	16 interviews; 27 school staff at closing schools	17 interviews: 39 school staff at receiving schools

Analysis

A narrative method was used in the analysis of the documents and interviews (Czarniawska, 1999). The point of departure was an effort to understand both the official narrative of participation in the processes in documents written by local authorities, and also the interviewees' construction and interpretation i.e., the meaning-making of their social reality shaping social structures and personal and professional relationships, were created and re-created (Johansson, 2005). This narrative approach sees meaning-making as a fundamental process through which individuals and groups understand their experiences, shape their identities, and navigate challenges, with profound implications for personal safety and confidence and organizational adaptability. Within organizational studies, narrative analyses of individuals' sense-making of events and processes are used as a way of understanding an organization and the processes and relationships that shape it (Czarniawska, 2005). Czarniawska (2005) points out that in all events there is a diversity of interpretations and experiences of the same sequence of events. The narrative analysis makes it possible to delineate a course of events, let different voices be heard, and distinguish nuances and contradictions to gain a multifaceted understanding.

The analysis followed Czarniawska's (1999) model of narrative analysis with a focus on *what is expressed* (interpretation of the stories), *how it is expressed* (analyses of the stories), *deconstruction*, *reconstruction*, and *set against/together other stories*. Through the analyses, stories of the reorganization process were formulated and reflected through various voices and perspectives, mainly of pupils and staff who were affected in different ways. Abildgaard et al.'s (2018) model for participation in changes in workplaces with the dimensions *content*, *process*, *directness*, and *goal*, and Hart's (1992) model for children's participation, have been used in the last step of the analysis to compare the different narratives about participation. Documents were analyzed as the official narrative of participation in the municipality's work, but also to provide a context for the entire change process. Through the analyses, themes and patterns, and also tensions and contradictions, were discerned. In qualitative studies, the goal is not to demonstrate how widespread a position is, but to illustrate

patterns and variations. In the results section, narratives about participation and experience in the change process are presented. The quotes from students and school staff that illustrate the different nuances of the narrative have, however, been selected because they represent the typical voices for a stance expressed by several people.

Ethics

For ethical reasons, to protect the confidentiality of the informants, the identity of the municipality and the district, the role of the staff interviewed, and the grade of the pupils are not revealed in the text. The documents will be referred to as "the investigation" (Investigation Meadbrook) and minutes of meetings. The municipality has been given the fictitious name *Meadowbrook*, the neighborhood where the schools were closed is called *Brookside*, and the two schools are given the names *Brookside Integrated School* (R-9) and the *Meadow Elementary School* (R-6). Among the school staff interviewed are principals, teachers, special education teachers, and counsellors. Principals and counsellors are, in most cases, alone in their role at each school, and in the results they will be referred to as *school staff* together with teachers. The research project has undergone a formal ethics review by the Ethics Review Authority (Dnr 2021-00080).

Context and background

At the centre of this story are pupils and school staff who go to school and work in Meadowbrook, a middle-sized Swedish municipality where residential segregation is large and the socio-economic conditions vary in different neighborhoods. In this study, segregation is understood as a process or a condition where different groups of people are separated, in the concrete case mainly related to ethnicity and socio-economic status. People with different backgrounds live in different residential areas and the children attend different schools.

Meadowbrook has a history as an industrial town that attracted people from the surrounding countryside. Starting in 1960, large groups of labour immigrants came mainly from Finland, Italy, and Yugoslavia. In the 1970s and 1980s, refugees also arrived from Chile, Iran, and Uganda. During the 1980s, many refugees arrived from Lebanon and Iraq, and during the 1990s, many refugees arrived from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Kurdistan. In the latest wave of refugees, people mainly came from Albania, Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan. In the 1960s, there was a significant housing shortage in Sweden, leading to the quick construction of large apartment complexes known as "million program areas," including Brookside in Meadowbrook. The schools in this study are located in one of these million program areas, where approximately 80 percent of the residents (compared with 29% in the entire municipality) were born in a country other than Sweden.

In Brookside, overcrowding, unemployment, the proportion of social welfare recipients as well as newly arrived refugees and the proportion with a migrant background are markedly higher than in other parts of the municipality, and the level of education of the residents is on average significantly lower than the municipal average. Despite efforts by politicians and education officials, the academic achievement at Brookside Integrated School (R-9) and the Meadow Elementary School (R-6) was

significantly lower than in other schools in the municipality. The municipality's politicians and education officials admitted that they did not live up to the *Education Act*'s (SFS 2010:800, 2010) requirement to offer all children an equal high-quality education so that they can enter upper secondary school and become active citizens and get the opportunities they have the right to.

Political goal: Reduce school segregation

The municipality has long struggled with large differences in academic achievement between schools, and at Brookside Integrated School, only 34.7 percent of the pupils were eligible for upper secondary school compared with the average 81.1 percent in the municipality. In Brookside, the proportion of pupils whose guardians with low or no post-secondary education was high and the proportion of newly arrived migrant pupils and pupils who were themselves born or had two parents born in another country was 97–100 percent.

Against this background, a broad political majority in the local council commissioned the education authority to investigate how school results could be improved and school segregation reduced. After the investigation, the authorities decided on several changes, including closing two school units, located in Brookside. A total of 269 pupils aged 9–15 and 33 permanently employed school staff were affected. The pupils were offered a place at five other schools in different geographical areas and were offered busing to their new school. School staff were relocated among all the municipality's schools according to current relocation legislation.

Results

Below are the narratives about the change processes and experiences of participation as they appear in official documents and the stories of pupils and school staff.

Narratives of participation in official documents

In the local authorities' investigation and proposal, it is stated that impact assessments would be made based on a children's rights perspective grounded in the basic principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), with a particular focus on Articles 2, 3, 6, 12, 28, and 29. Mainly, the authorities had taken note of all children's rights to educational equality, receive support in vulnerable situations, and overcome limitations. But they stated that they also would consider children's opinions and gave children the opportunity to make their voices heard. Giving children the right to educational equality was highlighted as being more important than geographical proximity to the school, and it was expressed that through structural changes in school organization and catchment area, all children would have greater access to better education and thus more equal opportunities: "Children and young people in socio-economically vulnerable areas risk a life of exclusion and thus the education authority assesses that initiatives aimed at helping pupils to complete their studies are to be seen as being in the best interest of children, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child" (Investigation Meadowbrook, p. 53, authors' translation).

In the investigation, dialogues between citizens, representatives of the education authority, and responsible politicians were planned for guardians and the public.

Due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions, these were hosted online. The impact assessments were, according to the investigation, based on information from pupils, principals, trade unions, other relevant stakeholders, research, and proven experience. It is not specified how views from these groups were considered in the design of the proposal. On the other hand, it is stated that the education authority would collaborate with union representatives so that "This is of the highest priority to make use of the staff's competence and create good conditions for the pupils' continued learning, but also so that pupils and staff feel secure in connection with the changes" (Investigation Meadowbrook, p. 71, authors' translation). The union representatives received information about the educational authority's work and were allowed to discuss various aspects of the process. However, from the minutes of the meeting, it is not possible to deduce what the union representatives said or how their views were considered in the process. The investigation stated that "Consideration must be given to the pupils' opinions, based on the pupils' age and maturity" (Investigation Meadowbrook, p. 71, authors' translation).

To conclude, in the documents a narrative emerges about a municipality and a school organization with major challenges to reach the *Education Act*'s (SFS 2010:800, 2010) goal of an equal and good education for all. In these documents, the ambition appears to make both pupils and guardians as well as school staff involved in the change process.

The pupils' stories about the process

Before the school closures, pupils at closing schools expressed that they did not understand at all why this was being done. They were very happy at their schools; they appreciated and expressed a great deal of trust in their teachers and other school staff.

The pupils' relocation process

The pupils were assigned to five different schools. They were allowed to wish for a friend with whom they would be placed in the same class. Many emphasized that they had older siblings or cousins who attended the school where they were about to attend. This seemed to reassure the pupils as they heard positive things about their new school. When assigning the pupils to new schools, principals, teachers, and student health staff were involved and made suggestions about who should be sent to the same school, but their recommendations were not always followed. In several cases, siblings were assigned to different schools.

There was an ambition that before changing schools the pupils would meet their new teachers and visit their new school. This was complicated by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, but pupils met their teachers digitally, and in most cases, also visited the school after school hours at the end of the spring term. Repeatedly, the pupils said they thought it would be fun to meet the new teachers, but above all to meet new classmates and make new friends. In the pupil interviews, there was expectation, but also concern. Mainly the pupils worried about not making friends, but also about the school bus.

When the pupils had spent almost a year at the new school, most of the pupils interviewed were happy in their new classes and had made new friends:

> *Pupil:* The first time we talked, I thought it was really bad because, well, I didn't want to leave Meadow Elementary. Because I felt so safe there … [the new school] still felt quite far from home. And kind of scary. I kind of felt sick just thinking about it. How it would be, because it's a long way from home. … I don't think like that anymore. No. Now it's okay. Now I think it was probably a good thing, but in the beginning, I don't know.
>
> *Interviewer:* Why was it a good thing?
>
> *Pupil:* Like, or good thing, but like, that I made new friends, and maybe I learned more, maybe.

Most pupils enjoyed themselves, made new friends, and expressed a high degree of trust in their new teachers. Pupils at receiving schools said that the new pupils were a little shy at first, but their view was that they became part of the class and had become new friends. But the opposite also emerged, some pupils found it difficult to feel accepted by the new classes. Younger pupils seemed to have an easier time integrating than older pupils, partly because younger pupils engaged in games and activities that can include many participants and many games were physical and allowed participation regardless of language ability. Among older pupils, the activities were more linguistically oriented, and the groupings were firmer. Also, the primary school teachers tended to actively foster social inclusion and recess activities more than secondary school teachers.

Pupils' experiences and conditions for participation

From the pupils' answers, it can be assumed that the teachers tried to convey a positive image of the new schools and that the change would be positive. When asked if pupils had the opportunity to ask questions about the change and if they were listened to, pupils said the following:

> *Pupil:* Mm, they should have asked us anyway, and not just changed without us knowing anything.
>
> *Pupil:* I got to say what I thought, although it didn't change much.

From the pupils' perspective, the decision came very suddenly, and their opinions did not influence the process or the decision. The responsible politicians visited the pupils to inform them of the decision; the pupils remembered that the politicians were there, but nothing else. Staff confirmed the pupils' experiences and lack of participation. According to them, the politicians talked in a way that the pupils did not understand, and some expressed themselves bluntly about the reason for the school closing:

> *School staff:* They were out talking to the pupils, and they would get to ask questions and stuff like that. So that it was an attempt to make the pupils feel that they were involved. But those of us who were there probably didn't think that they [the pupils] had much to say anyway. It felt like these politicians had already decided beforehand what they were going to say and pretty much how they were going to answer …

> *School staff:* Yes, there were pre-written answers and not at the children's level at all.

The older pupils were critical of the negative way the politicians talked about the school and the pupils. The pupils did not feel heard by the politicians and did not perceive it as a genuine conversation.

In summary, a number of factors influenced the pupils' perspectives. The age of the pupils plays a role in how they reason about the change of school, as well as its causes and consequences. Many did not understand why the politicians made this decision, and those older pupils who did understand did not agree with the decision. In this process, the children and teenagers who were affected by the decision were not consulted, and on the occasions where they met politicians, the pupils reported not being consulted or listened to and that everything had already been decided. However, after the school change, most of the pupils reported enjoying their new school. Thus, the teachers seem to have created an inclusive classroom climate.

The school staff's stories

The school staff, both at closing and receiving schools, agreed with the local authorities' description of the problem; school segregation was unanimously perceived as a major problem on a societal level, and housing and school segregation meant limited opportunities for the pupils:

> *School staff:* Yes, I am positive about the decision itself, at least from an integration point of view in that I think that everyone in a society needs to meet.

There was strong support for implementing the changes. However, many were critical of how the process was carried out. Everyone—the public, staff, and pupils—was informed of the proposal to close schools on the same day. Staff were not given any preparation time before telling pupils, and the timing of the information was ill-considered. The school staff felt that the education authorities "forgot" that staff, pupils, and parents all need to receive information in good time to manage this type of change:

> *School staff:* It came on the second day of school, right in the morning, that we had the proposal presented to us. And then already that afternoon we were expected, or it was an order: you must tell the children. Then we protested a bit politely: "But the preschool class, they have their second day today … shall we tell them that we are going to close? They are six years old, and the ones in Year 1 are seven …" But there was no, no mercy. "You must tell all the children today." And then information would go out in the afternoon to guardians. It's also a strange way … you know that too … if you get a message like this at 7:30 in the morning and then at 8:15 you are expected to oversee teaching, tell the children that the school is going to close, they are only six or seven years old.

The school staff quickly had to try to find interpreters to be able to convey the information to guardians, who in many cases did not know enough Swedish to com-

prehend the information in Swedish. At the same time, they did not know much, and they were asked many questions that they could not answer.

> *School staff:* Much is unclear, and much is placed on us teachers, mentors, and staff at the school. That a decision is made based on a proposal, but there is no plan: this is how it should be done. Both we and the pupils have a lot of questions to which there are no real answers, from anywhere. And the pupils turn to us, and the parents turn to us, even though we don't have much concrete to offer.

The school staff expressed that they felt abandoned and alone, but that in front of the pupils and parents, they had to convey the closures as a positive change.

School staff relocation process

The school staff at closing schools felt that their experiences and skills were not taken into consideration in the relocation process. It was difficult not knowing where, or even if, they would be working in the autumn, and that the relocation process was perceived long.

> *School staff:* How [the local council] has dealt with us … it is beneath contempt! For real! We don't know anything.

Not being listened to and the fact that those who oversaw the relocation process did not inform or communicate with the staff were recurring criticisms. In the process, the principals themselves and the union representatives were the ones they trusted, but the teachers were critical of the local education authorities, who they believed had lost sight of the fact that they were dealing with human beings. The school staff at the closing schools expressed a lost trust in the education authorities. The education authorities failed to make use of the resources, knowledge, and experience available in the personnel group.

> *School staff:* This feeling, "Doesn't anyone want me in Meadowbrook? Am I not good enough?", is what many of us felt. … I felt that those from Meadowbrook local council have been absent.

Many staff had worked together for a long time. It is a difficult and complex job, and parting from the workgroup was also sad:

> *School staff:* You also have to understand that there is sadness in this that staff have worked together for a long time, but we are only expected to say goodbye to each other and accept the situation and then everyone starts at completely different schools and no feelings are involved. That's not how humans work. So, the understanding of that process, that we have feelings in it, I would have wanted a plan for that.

There were thus many emotions involved in the process, including the feeling of not being good enough and sadness at leaving pupils, colleagues, and a workplace that they enjoyed.

Competence and professional identity in the change process

The teachers at the closing schools had significant experience, intercultural compe-

tence, and knowledge of working with multilingual pupils. They worked on language development in all subjects and collaborated with study supervisors in different languages. They were used to meeting guardians from different cultures, with varying knowledge of the Swedish language, society, and school system. They also met pupils and guardians who experienced the trauma of dictatorships, war, migration, and discrimination. The staff shared professional pride and an awareness of one's knowledge.

When the proposal for the changes was presented, it was emphasized that the schools were being closed due to segregation and such a large percentage of the pupils did not achieve passing grades. This contributed to the teachers at closing schools feeling singled out as incompetent since their pupil's lacked knowledge and had low academic achievement.

> *School staff:* We have probably had the feeling that we are seen as incredibly bad teachers, that is the feeling that exists here. Unspoken and pronounced.

At the receiving schools, the staff did not speak of their colleagues at the closing schools in this way. However, some asked why the pupils' grades were so low, even though they had higher staffing levels. In the closing schools, the staff had been told that their skills would be needed, but this promise was not fulfilled, which affected both their self-esteem and professional confidence.

Teachers at the receiving schools were apprehensive about meeting a group of pupils with a background many had not worked with before. Teachers described feeling uncertain as many lacked experiences in working with multilingual pupils. In some schools, the principals from the closing schools were invited to give a digital lecture about intercultural approaches. Some teaching teams had taken the initiative to read didactic literature on language development methods on their own and together discussed how they could implement the advice in their classroom. In the teaching teams at receiving schools, there were intense discussions:

> *School staff:* No, but you would have wanted something central. Maybe those who have worked a lot, maybe at Brookside Integrated or Meadow Elementary, tips and advice.

Opinions were divided; some believed that this type of "free" skill development was good since they were able to start from their own needs in their classes. Others said that they were insecure and that they had been left to look after themselves without any coherent, structured continuing education.

The school staff's experience of participation in the change process

Some of the staff had the opportunity to express their opinions at various instances and meetings, and some were interviewed within the framework of the investigation. However, after the decision was made, teachers felt that there was no room to involve them in the process.

> *School staff:* No one listens to us, really. At all. We write down our thoughts, but what happens to them afterward? Where do they end up? We have no idea! We are as worried about ourselves as we are about the pupils.

This shows a great deal of disappointment toward the educational authority and how they handled the process. The recurring criticism was that they were not listened to and that the views they raised in various contexts were not considered or did not receive any feedback. The staff stated that meetings were held for show and had no real function.

> *School staff:* This is what you must do when you go through a process like this so that everyone feels listened to. Although no one was listening.

The staff stressed the inclusion of the pupils and placement in classes, but also raised practical problems that needed to be solved such as buses, leisure time, access to interpreters, and sickness, transport options such as taxis, since many of the pupils' parents neither have a driving license nor access to a car. Many of these questions remained unanswered, creating concern.

> *School staff:* They want to let us be involved, but neither we nor the pupils have been listened to. After all, you are not involved if [what you say] is not weighed into anything … it just feels like a paper product, actually.

Although there was strong support for implementing the changes to reduce school segregation, staff expressed strong criticism that the people in charge had not thought through all the aspects and that those working on the ground had to "invent the wheel while driving." The important thing was implementation, not the method. It was implemented very quickly, but participation was not used as a resource or viewed as part of the change process.

> *School staff:* The decision was not so thoroughly worked out, that it will look like this, like this, and like this and we will implement it like this, like this. Who is involved, who is responsible for the different aspects? "… It feels like it is very poorly thought through and [not] worked out from start to goal.

In summary, the school staff's stories show broad support for the decision itself but a strong criticism of how changes were carried out. They highlight the lack of information during the process. At the same time, they were expected to act as safe adults and convey trust and a positive image to the pupils, which added pressure. They also did not feel that their intercultural competencies and experiences of teaching second language pupils were considered a resource. Conversely, staff at receiving schools described a lack of experience in working with second-language pupils, and many of the teachers feel that the demands increased as they got larger classes and more pupils with greater needs, and they expressed a strong sense of inadequacy.

Discussion

Pupils as participants in change processes in school organizations

The overall aim of the present study was to analyze narratives of participation during the reorganization of a municipal school organization, intended to reduce school segregation and increase equality for the pupils. Participation is a concept with positive connotations and an aspirational ideal in all democracies. In the analyzed organizational change, educational equality and the long-term societal and social inclusion of all pupils, regardless of background, were the goals of the project, and

the investigation and proposal were grounded in a children's rights perspective. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which also is implemented as Swedish law (SFS 2018:1197, 2010), recognizes children as active participants in decisions that affect their lives. It emphasizes the importance of including children in discussions, consultations, and decision-making processes concerning issues that impact them directly. Recognizing children's right to participation also entails empowering them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to engage effectively in decision-making processes. The goal of politicians and school administrative staff in the municipality was, with explicit reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to involve pupils in the process through interviews in the investigation, and politicians visited the schools to provide information and talk to the pupils. However, the goal was not realized since many of the pupils did not understand the reasons for the changes. The politicians who met with the students were overly focused on using grades as the sole measure of success. Their approach toward the students was characterized by a clear focus on deficiencies. Even though Swedish society and most schools are characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, there is a strong norm of monolingualism. Research has highlighted that bilingualism rather than being viewed as a resource in many contexts still is considered a "state of emergency, a deficiency, or even a learning disability" (Lindberg, 2009. p. 19). School staff expressed that the politicians did not speak to the children in a manner and language they could understand. When the politicians met with the pupils, there already was a fixed proposal, and the pupils' views could not influence the decision. The pupils thus did not have the opportunity to be active participants, and their participation must be categorized as participation on the lower levels of Hart's (1992) model, which Hart terms non-participation. However, after the school closures were completed, most pupils who changed schools reported that they were happy at their new schools with their new teachers and classmates, and had made new friends. In this sense, they became included in their new school environment. Despite a lack of participation in the process, the teachers succeeded in creating a safe and inclusive environment. Whether this change in the school organization leads to better results and thus greater choices, life chances, and social inclusion for these pupils, it is still too early to say.

The school staff's (lack of) experiences of participation in the change process

Among the school staff, there was unanimous and strong support for the content and goal of the changes that could aid in a positive experience of participation in the change process (cf. Abildgaard et al., 2018). Principals, teachers, and other school staff agreed with politicians and the educational authority that "something" had to be done to reduce school segregation and the negative consequences this had for pupils who did not get equal life opportunities. They also pointed out that segregation is a problem for all pupils in the municipality in all neighborhoods if they do not meet people with various backgrounds and experiences. This support and the fact that the school staff shared the politicians' and education authorities' vision was a resource throughout the change process and created understanding and acceptance of the decision to close the schools (cf. Meyer et al., 2007), despite feelings of sadness

associated with leaving colleagues and a workplace they enjoyed. Foremost, the school staff were concerned about how things would go for the pupils, but also their own work situations. The staff's attitude toward the premise of the decision contributed to creating a feeling of security for the pupils since the staff conveyed a positive picture of the changes.

In line with Hargreaves (2004), the staff in this study were not opposed to the decision as such, but rather strongly critical of *how* the process was carried out. The views of the staff were not solicited by the decision-makers, and in the cases where the staff were allowed to present their views, they did not receive any feedback on if and how their views were taken into account or why they were ignored. As Gustavsson (2015) points out, participation presupposes commitment but also opportunities to channel this commitment and in this process of change, the staff's participation was "forgotten," as one member of the staff put it. The participation of the staff was neither the goal nor even the means in this change process (cf. Abildgaard et al., 2018).

There were recurring stories about a lack of information about the process and timeline for various aspects and phases, which impacts how employees will experience a reorganization (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2020; Mento et al., 2002). Staff felt uncertain and stressed about the uncertainty of their new positions and schools. There was also a strong sense of disappointment that their competence and experience working with the current group of pupils with their special challenges were not noticed or considered. Conversely, there was a strong feeling of inadequacy at the receiving schools when they got larger classes and new pupils with needs they had no previous experience with. Despite the stated ambition in the investigation that the staff should be involved, it was unclear to the school staff who was directing and in charge of the process. They did not know who to turn to with their questions and the educational authority was described as "invisible." Formally, the process was coordinated with union representatives at so-called collaboration meetings, and the principals were the ones who would run the project at each school, but the school staff testified that many practical and crucial questions were left hanging in the air and remained unanswered for a long time, which created frustration and concern.

Conclusion

School organizations maneuver around and respond to political decisions. A challenge for creating experiences of participation is that the work within an organization is conducted at the respective level (e.g., the level of local authority, principal, teacher, pupil), and there may be a lack of understanding and insight into how decisions are perceived at another level. The school staff requested the administrative management to meet with them so that they could describe how the changes were perceived by teachers and pupils. Against the background of the investigation's descriptions that both pupils and staff should be involved in the process, the disappointment increased when no one bothered to channel their commitment. In organizations, and especially when implementing change, some kind of system is needed to capture opinions and use them to provide feedback so that employees both feel and are involved. An organization is its people, and the research suggests that employee commitment is crucial for a change process to succeed (Fullan, 2016).

Reducing segregation is a sensitive issue that needs to be implemented with even greater responsiveness as minority students and parents may feel targeted as the "problem" and singled out, as the school staff in the opening quote of the article pointed to. Integration should be a two-way process where people from different backgrounds come together on equal terms, viewing diverse cultural backgrounds as valuable resources. In this case, the changes aimed for equality in education, but they simultaneously included strong assimilationist features. For example, it was the students with a minority Swedish background who were expected to adapt to the majority conditions by being bused to schools dominated by students with a majority Swedish background, rather than the other way around. The *Education Act* (SFS 2010:800, 2010) states that the school must both convey and embody democratic values, and that is how pupils are raised to become democratic citizens. From a societal perspective, lack of participation is dangerous since it risks undermining trust in society (Hart, 1992). Merely listening to someone and then completely ignoring their input, without explaining why it is not included in the further process, becomes more destructive than if you were not allowed to voice your opinion at all. Learning about democracy means that pupils also comprehend how different levels of an organization understand and view what is said and what opportunities and options for action exist. However, democracy does not mean that everyone gets what they want. Many change processes are painful, and all change involves a certain amount of uncertainty. Involving those who are primarily affected by the changes and having them participate in the change process can be a way to contribute to the changes being perceived as constructive.

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