The Subjective Side of Success: 
Children’s Stories of a Good Life

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study conducted in one elementary school in Helsinki, Finland, during a four-week project that began on the UN day of children’s rights in 2013. According to the 12th and 13th articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and furthermore they have the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds (UNICEF, 1989). The authors argue that children’s voices are not sufficiently heard in the process of forming the educational policies related to success at school. The data was collected from the children in the form of stories. The paper, co-written by the researchers and the teacher, draws lessons from the students’ stories about the good life of an imagined person named Sofia Tammi. The aim of analysing the stories was to identify and describe children’s aspirations and experiences, and especially how they defined success through the theme of ‘good life’. Furthermore, the authors explore the meaning of inclusion and justice in the Nordic context.

KEYWORDS

Children’s’ Wellbeing, Critical Pedagogy, Diversity, Inclusive Education, Justice, Participatory Research, Researching with Children, Success

INTRODUCTION

The justification for this project can be found in the mismatch between shared fundamental values for educational success in the Nordic countries, such as democracy, social justice and inclusion, which are frequently stated in educational policy documents and the reality in many schools in these countries. This study aims to discuss the meanings of the terms equality and inclusive pedagogy in the framework of discourses on success in the Nordic context. We might argue that these fundamental values are imaginaries only as educational research has revealed issues of inequalities and marginalisation of students in many schools in the Nordic countries.
With this study we want to pursue a new discourse regarding good practices in schools. Thus, we are interested in the re-thinking of the meaning of inclusive pedagogy fitting into today’s Nordic context. The collaborative research project between a school teacher and researchers aims to set new perspectives on how to move forward towards more inclusive practices in schools which we believe schooling in the 21st century must highlight. Inclusion is defined as an on-going process focusing on increased participation in education for everyone involved (Booth, 2010). Inclusive practice focuses on diversity and the way schools respond to, and value a diverse group of students as well as other members of the school community. Hence, attention is centred on exclusion and discrimination against social and racial circumstances, religion, gender and ability of students and their families.

This study brings together methodology used in a collaborative research initiative between members of a project entitled Learning Spaces for Social Justice, and a school where the data was collected. The schools invited to participate in this research project are the ones that have been identified as successful schools by the researchers, especially in the way they implement social justice in the everyday schoolwork. In one of the participating schools we were overall impressed by how the children were engaged in active learning and group work. Moreover we were interested in investigating in more details a story-writing project on the meaning children give to the expression of a good life.

The paper is co-written by two researchers and a special needs teacher who initiated and organised the project with the children. While we are aware that this complicates the structure of the article, it presents an important collaborative research practice. Involving teachers and students in the research process challenges the ‘traditional’ power structures and positions of the teacher, students and school life as an object of the study. In this research we aimed to mediate the voices of students and their teacher. Thus the aim of this article is not to melt all the voices together, but to allow the teacher’s and students’ voices to be as authentic as possible. This article is structured as follows: The next two sections explain the theoretical framework for the study, then Hanna, the special needs teacher explains the story making process, introducing thus the research data, setting and participants.

SUCCESS AND JUSTICE THROUGH THE VOICES OF CHILDREN

In this section we first aim to ground the discourses on success in the Finnish context since the study took place in a Finnish elementary school. Then we aim to introduce three ways of discussing success: personal, social and political.

Finnish policy analyst Pasi Sahlberg describes how, since the 1970s, Finland has changed its traditional education into publicly financed education system with extensive equity, good quality and wide participation (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011). Rizvi and Engel (2009) claim that it is fair to say that neo-liberalism is concerned with issues of justice. They argue that the focus in such discourse is on equal access to education instead of deconstructing the structures within an education system (Rizvi & Engel, 2009, p. 529). We argue that equality and quality may become “taken for granted” values in the Nordic context if we do not research and discuss the meaning of such terms.

In recent years the Finnish education system, policies and discourse about education have been deeply affected by the imaginary of the World’s best education system according to the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). There are concerns about the focus on the shifting economical processes of globalisation, including education success that can become, for example, an export product. We would like to discuss further the idea of access to education to consider equal opportunities to participate regardless of the language hierarchies and other possible intersections affecting school life.
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