

## **Psychosocial learning environment and inclusion in primary school: Challenges from a student perspective**

**May Olaug Horverak**

*Birkenes Learning Centre, Norway*

Studies show that despite many programs with intentions to create a positive and inclusive learning environment, bullying and exclusion is still a challenge. This article investigates the following: (a) What challenges are there in the psychosocial learning environment in primary school, from a student perspective, and (b) what strategies can students apply to solve these challenges and contribute to creating an inclusive learning environment? The framework for data collection has been a five-step method for mastery, participation, and motivation, based on health-promoting theory and self-determination theory. Student representatives applied the method in their classes through student council work, with support from their teachers. A content analysis of student data identified challenges related to three main categories: relational factors, structural factors, and individual factors. To solve these challenges, the students suggested reward systems and inclusive strategies, such as asking others to join when playing, inviting someone home, and talking to students who are alone. The article concludes that it is important to include students in processes of change, and work systematically and over time to create a good learning environment.

### **Introduction**

The recent years, there has generally been an increase in problems children and adolescents experience. The pandemic disrupted education systems in many countries, and this affected the most vulnerable students most (UNESCO, 2023). Studies show that the pandemic caused children and adolescents stress, worry, helplessness and behavioural problems (Meherali et al., 2021). Surveys from Norwegian schools in recent years also show an increasing number of children who experience challenges. Results from a survey of 10 to 12-year-olds showed that even though many children are happy in school, there are also those who report that they do not have friends, that they are bullied and that they are lonely or stressed (Enstad & Bakken, 2022; Løvgren & Svagård, 2019). As much as 18% say that they are being excluded by others, harassed, or threatened at least once a month or more often, and 14% experience that they do not fit in in their class. One of four fears going to school (Enstad & Bakken, 2022), an increase from one of five in the previous survey (Løvgren & Svagård, 2019). This confirms a negative trend in how children experience school.

A study based on parent reporting concerning children who have anxiety about going to school showed that half of the children who struggle with school refusal are also being bullied in school (Amundsen & Møller, 2020). Of the children who were bullied, 90% experienced the school as an unsafe place, according to the parents, and 55% of these parents reported that the school had not done anything to stop the bullying. Student surveys from seventh grade show an increase in bullying in Norway, from 7.1% in 2019-2020 to 7.9% in 2021-2022 (Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). This showed

that even though many students thrive in school, there is an increasing number who experience different challenges socially and emotionally, and that experience school as an unsafe place to be. There is a need to change this negative development, and support children to deal with the growing problems they experience, both individual challenges and social challenges.

The context of the current study is a project where a five-step method for mastery, participation and motivation has been developed. The method aims at giving students real influence in school by letting them define what is important, success factors and obstacles, and plan solutions together (Horverak et al., 2023). The purpose of working this way is to create an inclusive learning environment. It is a condition for inclusion that students participate in decision making, that they feel that they are part of and contribute to a community, and that they profit from it when it comes to learning, both socially and in subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019-2020); Haug, 2014). Previous studies where the five-step method has been applied in a secondary school context (Horverak & Helmersen, 2023; Horverak & Jenssen, 2020) have shown that this method has a potential to engage students to participate in creating a good learning environment.

### **Theoretical foundation**

The theoretical foundation on which the five-step method is based is Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory and Antonovsky's (2012) health promotion theory. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), three basic needs must be met to achieve intrinsic motivation – competence, which is the students' need to master exercises; autonomy, which concerns making decisions in one's own life; and relatedness, which means having relations to others. Through reflecting on what is important for the class and planning on how to deal with what the class struggle with, students may experience autonomy by taking control of a process, as well as competence and relatedness, by trying to achieve things together. Having intrinsic motivation means that one wishes to perform different activities, and this type of motivation contributes to a feeling of meaningfulness, which is one of the important elements of Antonovsky's (2012) health promotion theory. He identified factors that supported health and well-being and suggested that to develop a sense of coherence, which is needed to deal with stress and challenging situations in life, a person must experience comprehensibility, meaning that one understands the situation; manageability, believing that one has skills or ability to cope; and meaningfulness, finding something worthwhile.

A literature review on health-promoting measures in kindergartens and schools showed that social and emotional competence is one of the indicators of health promotion, as well as capacity for action, stress management competence and health promotion competence (Helmersen & Stiberg-Jamt, 2019). The health promotion competences are partly integrated in the Norwegian curricula, where life skills, coping and student participation are central themes and principles. Everyone is to be part of an inclusive learning environment where health, thriving and learning is promoted (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). There has been an increase in programs in school internationally focusing on social and emotional learning, meaning processes where students develop

knowledge, attitudes and skills to handle emotions, develop relations and solve problems (Goldberg et al., 2019). Meta-analyses on whole-school approaches for working with social and emotional learning have shown improvement in social and emotional competence, and reduced risk of behavioural problems (Goldberg et al., 2019; Stefan et al., 2022). A study on bullying from the Australian context also points to programs on emotional intelligence and resilience training as solutions to prevent bullying and argue that these types of programs should be implemented in schools throughout students' school lives (Bunnet, 2021).

Student participation is one of the principles that supports creating a good learning environment in school. There are different degrees of children's participation, as described in Hart's participation ladder (1992), and Shier's (2001) participation model. On the lowest level, children's viewpoints are listened to, and on the higher levels, children participate in decision making. Despite the focus on student participation in the official educational guidelines, different programs implemented to deal with challenges in the learning environment often emphasise the role of the adult, rather than student participation, which will be elaborated on below.

### **Former learning environment programs**

Four extensive learning environment programs were granted support from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in the late 1990s: *Olweus* anti-bullying program (Olweus & Limber, 2010), *Zero* (Roland et al., 2010), *Respect* (Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007) and *PALS* (Arnesen et al., 2003). Two of the programs, *Olweus* and *Zero*, had a goal of reducing bullying, while *Respect* had a wider focus on reducing more forms of behavioural problems. *PALS* (Positive behaviour, supporting learning environment and collaboration) focused on improving the learning environment through increasing students' competence socially and in subjects (Eriksen et al., 2014), and this is partly achieved through reinforcing positive behaviour.

The *Olweus* program is probably the most known anti-bullying program and has been implemented on a large scale in Norway and in other parts of the world (Bauer et al., 2007; Black & Jackson, 2007; Limber et al., 2004; Melton et al., 1998; Pagliocca et al., 2007). This program builds on the principles that the teachers in school are to be interested in the students, there should be clear boundaries and non-hostile negative consequences and teachers should be authorities (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Bullying is understood from an individual perspective, where some students are defined as aggressive bullies, and others as vulnerable victims (Olweus, 1974, 2010). *Zero* and *Respect* builds on the same individual understanding of bullying and include several of the same elements.

Despite quite robust data and partly positive effects of the programs (Ertesvåg, 2009; Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Roland et al., 2010; Sørli & Ogden, 2007), one may question whether some of the conclusions are mainly based on quantitative data (Stephens, 2011), where all questions are predefined, and the voices of the individual students are not really heard. Stephens (2011) pointed out that qualitative studies on a microlevel are also important – examinations of the class environment where

the bullying takes place. The current study includes this type of micro-level investigation, where the student voices are emphasised, and they themselves define challenges in the learning environment, and solutions to these.

### **Research questions**

According to the Norwegian curriculum, student participation is to be at the core of practices in school, and students are to contribute to making a safe learning environment for everyone (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). It is suggested that this could be achieved through student council work. The method applied in the current study, which originally was developed to be applied by teachers, has been a tool for student representatives to work with developing a safe and inclusive learning environment in their classes, and this work has been facilitated through the student councils.

The current study examines parts of the process of applying the five-step approach in primary schools and investigates the following research questions: (a) What challenges are there in the psychosocial learning environment in primary school from a student perspective, and (b) what strategies do the students apply to solve these challenges and create an inclusive learning environment? In the following, the intervention and research method will be described, followed by a presentation and discussion of findings.

### **Method**

This study applies a qualitative approach, with an inductive analysis generating theory from data, interpreting the world through individuals' interpretation, and constructing a view on the situation through investigating interactions (Bryman, 2012). The purpose of the study is not to generalise truths about challenges in the learning environment and how these may be solved. This study rather aims at giving useful insight to relevant stakeholders, as much educational research is about (Bachman, 2008). Data has been collected from student representatives on four different student councils, and the classes they represent, during an intervention that will be described more in detail below.

When a qualitative approach is applied, the researcher does not necessarily have a clear strategy for data collection, but the research design is adjusted and reconstructed during the research process (Maxwell, 2013). The plan in this study was to collect evaluation data after the intervention to investigate how the approach worked. However, during the intervention, the students' reflections revealed useful information about how the process proceeded when the students identified challenges and came up with solutions. This became the focus of the current study, influencing the data collection and analysis, which are described in the following.

### **Intervention and data collection**

The intervention included giving training and guidance through the student council, on how to carry out a five-step method in classes to work with creating an inclusive learning environment. The members of the student councils were elected by their class, two

student representatives from each class. Two schools were included in the intervention. In the first school, there was one student council for second to fourth grade, including 18 student representatives representing nine classes, and one for fifth to seventh grade, including 20 student representatives representing 10 classes. In the second school, there was one student council for fifth to seventh grade, including six student representatives representing three classes. The student councils generally have a meeting each month. The teacher is present during the meetings and supports the student council by helping them lead the meeting and take notes. When student representatives follow up on student council work in their class, a teacher is also present. The intervention was carried out once each school year but was somewhat disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Data was collected from the autumn 2019 to the autumn of 2020. Additional data was collected after a new round of intervention during the school year 2021-2022.

In the first student council meeting, the student representatives answered the first three questions in the approach: (1) what is important for the students in the class to be okay; (2) what the students in the class are satisfied with; and (3) what is difficult (Figure 1).

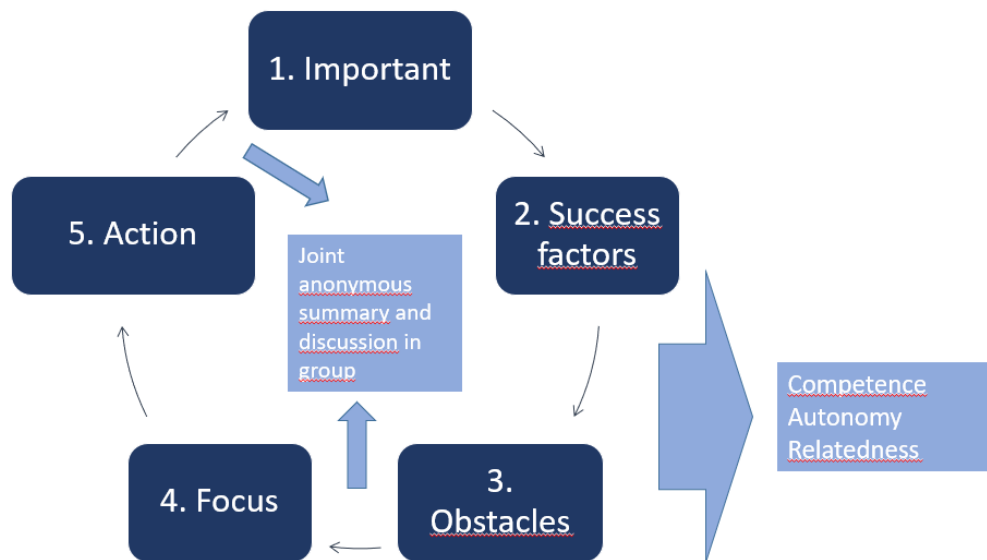


Figure 1: The five-step method (previously published in Horverak, 2020)

The student representatives asked their peers in class the same questions and collected anonymous answers. The students' answers to question three, concerning what was difficult for the class, are included as data material in this article. In the next student council, the student representatives made summaries of the reflections from their classes with aid from the teacher, and they discussed what the different classes needed to focus on, and possible strategies to choose from to meet the different challenges. The student representatives then presented their summaries to their classes, and each class chose a focus area and strategies to apply. Overviews of these plans from one of the schools are

part of the data material. The teachers supported the process in each class, but it was the student representative that led the process, and the class decided on strategies to apply.

After about a month, the class evaluated whether they had followed up on their plans and whether the class environment had improved. In the next student council, the student representatives reported on what focus areas and strategies their class had chosen, and the evaluations from their class. Notes from the student councils are included as data material. After the intervention in 2022, data was collected by distributing a short, anonymous survey to all the students in the first school. The students were asked to answer “yes” or “no” to whether they felt better when being in school after they had worked with the learning environment, whether they had followed up on the plans the class made and whether they as a group felt better in class. They were also asked to reflect on what had improved.

### Sample

Two schools, including four student councils, were included in the data collection in 2019 and 2020 (Table 1). In total, 48 student representatives have been included in the intervention. Written reflections from 140 students from the classes, as well as from the student representatives present at the first student council meeting in school one, were included when analysing challenges in the learning environment, resulting in 171 individual, written student reflections. The data collected during 2019 and 2020 covered a period of one and a half year. The students in fifth and sixth grade in school two, autumn 2019, are the same as the students in sixth and seventh grade in autumn 2020, however, the student representatives changed.

Table 1: Overview of sample

School	Level	School year / Semester	Student representatives	Classes represented	Students from classes
School 1	2	2019/2020	6	3	9
School 1	3	2019/2020	6	3	17
School 1	4	2019/2020	6	3	19
School 1	5	2019/2020	8	4	35
School 1	6	2019/2020	6	3	16
School 1	7	2019/2020	6	3	21
School 2	5	Spring 2020	2	1	14
School 2	6	Spring 2020	2	1	9
School 2	5	Autumn 2020	2	1	-
School 2	6	Autumn 2020	2	1	-
School 2	7	Autumn 2020	2	1	-
Totals			48	24	140

*Note.* The number of students from classes are those there is individual written data material from. There are data from one class on each level in school one, except from level five, where there are data from two classes.

All students come from rural areas, and they present a rather homogenous group. There are only a few students from each grade with a minority background. In the final round of data collection in 2022, the survey carried out in School 1 was answered by 278 students (about 50% response rate), quite evenly distributed from second to seventh grade.

## Analysis

To answer the research questions in this study, a summative, traditional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) has been applied, based on the two main themes in the research questions: challenges in the learning environment and problem-solving strategies. The students' answers to question three in the five-step method have been coded through an inductive analysis, and these codes have been systematised and categorised based on underlying main categories identified through the analysis. Three main categories were identified in the student material: relational factors, structural factors, and individual factors. Reflections from students as "I do not like when people tease me" are for example coded as "bullying", with other reflections where students write "bullying". These are categorised as relational factors, as they concern difficulties in relations. Another relational factor is drama, coded from reflections such as "drama with the girls". The main category structural factors is chosen based on reflections concerning breaking rules in the classroom. Many students write about "noise" which is one of the codes here. Individual factors are more personal conditions. For example, "having motivation" is an obstacle coded as "motivation".

The basis for categorisation was the coding of the material, and what the students have expressed is almost directly restated in codes, to make the results transparent, an important principle in content analysis (Bryman, 2012). This procedure resulted in many codes in each main category, and therefore, subcategories were developed to include codes that were related thematically, within each main category. For example, different forms of exclusion, as bullying, keeping others out, slandering, rude comments and different popularity were gathered in one subcategory, as they all include strategies students use to exclude each other. The concept "exclusion" is also used as a term in newer literature on bully research (Jørgensen, 2019), and it was therefore natural to choose this as a subcategory.

Occurrences of different challenges are presented in a table to show how often the individual challenges are expressed in the material. Converting material from words to number could make the research design be defined as a mixed method conversion design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), but since the collected material consists only of student reflections, the study is defined as qualitative. The analysis does not go into depth concerning phenomena as "bullying" and "exclusion", as the data material consists of relatively short and not elaborate answers. Also, the coding of the students' problem-solving strategies, based on notes from the student council meetings and the classes' plans, is closely related to the material, and the codes were collected in four main categories. The results were developed into a figure for presentation (Figure 2).

## **Ethical considerations**

The study was approved by SIKT, the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. Since all the data was collected anonymously, SIKT concluded that there should not be collected written consents from parents. An information letter was distributed to parents via the students and via the schools' learning platforms. It was advised that the researcher could be contacted if there were questions, that it was voluntary to contribute to research, and that all data collected was anonymous.

## **Validity**

A challenge with reliability in this study is the double role of the researcher, as both being a researcher and a supervisor in the project that forms the context of this study. Being involved in a project, and at the same time doing research on the same project, may lead to ignoring negative aspects in the data material, and a confirmation of predefined hypotheses. This is one of the criticisms of qualitative case-studies in general (Flyvbjerg, 2015), who argued that the question of verification and bias is not only relevant for case-design, but that the same risk lies in quantitative research. Whatever research approach, qualitative or quantitative, the researcher may have some bias based on background and competence, and an understanding of the world is constructed based on the theories one has knowledge of (Bhaskar, 2008). As mentioned, the purpose of this study is not to reveal truths to generalise, but rather utility, as advocated by Bachman (2008). The selection of students is therefore from a project where there has been focus on improving the learning environment, and the students have been involved in finding good problem-solving strategies.

## **Findings**

The three main categories identified in the analysis of the students' reflections on what was difficult in class were relational factors, structural factors, and individual factors (Table 2).

Relational factors were mentioned 73 times by the students. The different subcategories included are mainly related to student-student relations, but some also mentioned issues related to the teacher. The four subcategories identified in the student material were exclusion, conflict, aggressive behaviour, and teacher-related challenges. Exclusion includes bullying (22), rejection (5) talking behind each other's backs (2), rude comments (5) and different popularity (2). One student from sixth grade wrote "Often we give crappy comments to each other", and another student from the lower levels commented on bullying: "Some are bullied, and I become very sad. Very often there is arguing". This shows that some students reported on what was difficult for their peers when they got this opportunity, and not only challenges they were involved in themselves. The subcategory conflict includes disagreement (1), drama (12) and arguing (7). Aggressive behaviour means that students throw things (2) are violent (1) or rage (1). One student wrote: "We make noise and throw things around!!" When it comes to the subcategory teacher-related issues, a couple of the students mentioned that it was noisier when there were substitute



teachers in class (2), otherwise this subcategory concerns teacher behaviour (11), meaning that the teacher is either not motivating or too strict.

Table 2: Challenges in the learning environment from a student perspective (N = 171)

Main category	Subcategory	Code	Occurrences
Relational factors (Total 73)	Exclusion	Bullying	22
		Rejection	5
		Talking behind each other's backs	2
		Rude comments	5
		Different popularity	2
	Conflict	Disagreement	1
		Drama	12
		Fighting	7
	Aggressive behaviour	Throwing things	2
		Violence	1
		Rage	1
Teacher-related issues	Teacher behaviour	11	
	Substitute teacher	2	
Structural factors (Total 69)	Rule-breaking	Noise	63
		Be on time	3
		Raising hand	1
	External conditions	Lack of equipment	1
		Lack of boundaries	1
Individual factors (Total 4)	Socioemotional difficulties	Lack of motivation	1
		Laziness	1
	Physical problems	Headache	2

*Note.* The total number includes 31 student representatives and 140 other students from classes

Structural factors include frames and regulations in the everyday life in school and challenges related to this, something that is mentioned 69 times in total. The subcategories identified were rule-breaking and external conditions. Of the codes under rule-breaking, noise is the most prominent (63), otherwise the students mention problems with coming on time (3) and raising hands (1). A student from third grade wrote "it is difficult to work since they make so much noise". One student from fourth grade specified why noise is a problem "that someone makes noise in class, and then it is difficult to concentrate". Another student from fourth grade wrote that there was "little silence, much screaming". Of external conditions, lack of equipment is mentioned (1), which concerned a ball that constantly was missing because it was thrown on a roof, and lack of boundaries (1), as expressed here: "that we kind of do what we want in school".

Some individual factors were mentioned when the students reflected on obstacles in the class environment. The subcategories identified include socioemotional difficulties as lack of motivation (1) and laziness (1), and physical problems as headache (2). The latter is also related to structural factors by a student, more specifically to noise. A student from fifth grade wrote that "it is just, that when we make noise in classes, then many students may get a headache".

### Problem-solving strategies from a student perspective

The students' chosen focus areas mainly concerned avoiding noise in class and being kind and including each other. Based on the student's choice of problem-solving strategies, four main categories are identified: include each other, acknowledge each other, avoid negative behaviour, and avoid making noise (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The students' problem-solving strategies (use web or PDF viewer 'zoom in' function to view)

Different forms of *inclusion* were mentioned by the students. One student told: “We had a note on the door, and when we went out, we were to look at it. It said, ‘be more inclusive’”. On a question from the teacher about what inclusion meant, the student answered, “to include is to make other children join when playing, and if someone is outside, go over to them”. The students suggested that they could ask each other to join when they were playing or doing different activities, say “yes” to those who ask to join, and when they for example play football, they may make sure that everyone gets the ball, and help each other find the right spot on the team. To make sure that everyone is invited home to someone, or to parties, is also mentioned. Otherwise, the students were concerned that everyone is to have friends, and that they could ask others to be friends.

Some students decided that they would *acknowledge* each other in different ways, and suggested strategies as being helpful towards each other, give hugs and comfort when someone is sad, and help if someone is hurt. They suggested giving compliments or saying positive things to each other, going over to others and talking to them, smiling, and saying “hi” to each other. One student also suggested that they could have a bench for those who were lonely, so they could sit there if they were alone, but this suggestion was quickly withdrawn as they thought that this could be a bit silly, and potentially lead to bullying.

Different forms of *negative behaviour the students wanted to avoid* were mentioned. They suggested that they were not going to bully each other, talk behind each other’s back or say rude or negative things to each other. They also mentioned that they were not to talk about old conflicts, make dramas, argue, or understand everything in the worst possible sense, but rather try to avoid misunderstandings. A suggestion was that they were to stop arguments by trying to get those who argued to speak to each other in a better way. The students commented that things often got worse when the teacher interfered, and that it was better that they solved their problems on their own. They also suggested that they could try to ignore peers who tried to make a drama. Otherwise, the students chose as strategy that they were not to hit each other or destroy each other when playing. Examples of the latter were not to take the ball from each other or run into each other when riding on a sleigh.

When it comes to *avoiding noise* in class, the students suggested that they could sit quietly and take care of themselves, raise their hands, and wait for their turn, listen to the teacher, not swear, and ask for short breaks. In addition, they suggested that the teachers held some outdoor-classes and that they used reward systems, for example by using an app with points or emojis, eating cake, watching a movie or doing other fun activities. They also suggested getting stars or filling a glass with marbles, one for each session they stayed still and worked well. When reaching a certain number of stars, or a glass full of marbles, they would receive a reward. More students commented that it could also be unfair when rewards were used, as the classes that were quiet and nice to begin with never received a reward.

## **Survey results**

The results from the survey show that 77 % agreed that they felt better in class after the intervention, 88% agreed on having followed up on the plan they made in class and 75% agreed that the group felt better after having worked with the learning environment. They explained that there was less swearing or bad language in class (reported by 12 students), less bullying (13 students), less arguing (5 students) and less noise (62 students). They also reported that they had become better at being nice to each other (19 students) and that they played more with each other or had more friends (32 students). One of the students reported “I think things have improved as I have someone to be with”.

## **Discussion**

The results show that students are particularly concerned with relational challenges in the learning environment, such as bullying, exclusion, drama, arguing and rude comments. The categories concerning relational factors overlap, and in a way, describe the same phenomenon, according to newer understandings of bullying as inclusion and exclusion processes (Jørgensen, 2019). In the new understanding of bullying, it is emphasised that the processes of inclusion and exclusion exist because a group needs to create a community, and they do this through excluding certain individuals, making sure that they themselves are included. This understanding focuses on group dynamics and contrasts Olweus' understanding of bullying (1974, 2012), where children are understood as agents or victims of aggressive behaviour. According to the newer understanding of bullying, the problems do not stop if, for example, one aggressor is removed, as others will take this place to maintain the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Jørgensen, 2019). Based on this understanding of bullying, it is important to work on changing negative group dynamics, rather than focusing on the individuals.

To improve the learning environment, the students chose to apply different types of problem-solving strategies. These mainly concerned creating a sense of community and facilitating for inclusion. Recent research literature on bullying emphasises the importance of students contributing to analysis of assessments of school practices (Restad & Sandsmark, 2021). The approach described in this study, where students identify challenges in the school environment and choose strategies to deal with these challenges, is an example of one way of making students participate. To achieve a good and inclusive learning environment, each student must experience being part of the community, as well as participating actively and influencing decisions (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019-2020)). A case-study from an Australian context showed a similar approach, where students worked together to find solutions to problems that arose in their class, resulting in positive relational agency, where students support each other, and collaborative classrooms (Morcom, 2022).

The effect of engaging students to create a good learning environment and prevent bullying has been confirmed through research (Polanin et al., 2012). Polanin et al.'s meta-study (2012) shows that interventions that have focused on the students that are not directly involved in the bullying has a good preventive effect. This type of universal

programs to prevent bullying are about changing attitudes of bystanders in bullying situations. Another literature review on bullying-research also shows that models with these types of measures have effect (Bradshaw, 2015). These approaches could be said to contrast the anti-bullying programs described above, The Olweus program (Olweus & Limber, 2012), Zero (Roland et al., 2010) and Respect (Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007), which focus more on the students involved in the bullying, defined either as bully or as victim. The intervention in the current study is more in line with the studies focused on engaging students not directly involved in bullying (Bradshaw, 2015; Polanin et al., 2012). In addition, student participation is in focus, rather than the role of the teacher, which is more emphasised in the anti-bullying programs (Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007; Olweus & Limber, 2012; Roland et al., 2010). When the five-step approach was applied, the students were engaged in both defining bullying as a challenge and finding solutions to create a positive development to include everyone and avoid bullying occurring. This ensures understanding and meaningfulness for the students, and when finding solutions, they may feel competence, all central aspects within health promotion theory (Antonovsky, 2012). In turn, this may make the students more resilient to handle stressful situations that may occur.

Related to health promoting theory and the health promotion indicator set described above (Helmersen & Stiberg-Jamt, 2019), the problem-solving strategies the students have come up with showed that they experienced having action competence and social and emotional competence to engage in the community positively. Previous studies from a lower secondary school context have shown similar findings from interventions with the five-step method (Horverak & Jenssen 2020; Horverak & Helmersen, 2023), however, the current study gives more insight into actual strategies that are applied in the process. The students participated in democratic processes and expressed a clear consciousness about contributing to finding solutions to problems, and that this gave better results than if the teachers try to solve something. Such an understanding of the situation, and one's own ability to handle it, contributes to what Antonovsky (2012) called a sense of coherence, which again increases stress tolerance.

In this study, the students were to make decisions based on discussions with their peers, which means participation on a high level according to Shier's model (2001). The British researcher Lundy (2007) pointed out that letting students' voices be heard in school is not enough to meet the requirements of article 12 in UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. (Ministry of Children and Families, 1991/2003). In cases that concern them, children's viewpoints are to be heard and given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. According to Lundy (2007), children must be active in the decision-making process to ensure meeting the requirement concerning giving due weight. When the students are given the possibility to decide which actions the class will take to create a good learning environment, it is the students themselves who make decisions, and the teacher contributes with guidance and support based on the students' age and maturity level.

When looking at the students' problem-solving strategies presented above, one may ask a question concerning whether it is possible with real participation in decision-making, or

whether the students can find solutions beyond what they already have experienced in the learning context. For example, the students suggested reward systems to deal with noise, a type of strategy that the teachers have used already. It is a general challenge with participation in decision-making processes that one is limited to choosing strategies one is already familiar with, so the decision will be influenced by previous experience. Still, this does not necessarily need to be a serious limitation, as what is most important is that the students feel a certain ownership towards the solutions they suggest.

The students' reflections show that they consider themselves active agents in creating a good learning environment. When students are empowered and engaged in finding solutions, this also strengthens autonomy, which again may contribute to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and through this, to improved endurance in following up on decisions. An important aspect is also that the students are given the possibility to be engaged through participation in decision-making processes in class, an important aspect of inclusion (Haug, 2014; Ministry of Education and Research, 2019-2020). Participation and having a democratic mind must be learnt and cannot be developed only by being implemented through formal guidelines (Sandanger & Johannessen, 2021). It is therefore important that students practice participation and democratic processes in school, despite there being limitations concerning the extent to which participation in decision-making is possible.

Even though children are to contribute to create a safe learning environment (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), it is still the teacher who has responsibility in the situation, and sometimes it is necessary to have an adult authority who takes control and solves conflicts. One may also question children's possibility to make choices and consider possible consequences of their own choices. For example, it may be difficult for a child who is exposed to bullying to do something to change the situation. Perhaps peers cannot find good solutions to these types of problems either. Having autonomy, which means making decisions concerning own life and actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017), may not help a student in primary school who experiences being in a difficult situation. Then it is important that teachers interfere and make decisions for the group. Still, from a preventive perspective, the students are important agents to create a good learning environment. The problem-solving strategies the students suggested, as presented above, show that the approach applied in this study is one way to engage students to create a better learning environment and include each other.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude the main findings of the study, the students mainly reported relational challenges in the learning environment, related to exclusion of different sorts, and structural challenges, more specifically noise. To meet the relational challenges, the students suggested different problem-solving strategies to include and acknowledge each other. When it comes to noise, the students are mainly concerned with reward systems, but they also have other strategies such as sitting quietly, raising their hands, and not swearing out loud. In general, the study shows an approach that solves challenges in the

learning environment by a positive collaboration with students. As shown, the students may contribute themselves towards improving the learning environment, when they are engaged systematically to identify what is challenging and find solutions to this, something that has implications for how schools may work upon improving the learning environment.

This study is limited in time and scope, especially the data from school 2 were sparse, and there is not specific information about socio-economic status or ethnic composition. To support the findings, more extensive, and longitudinal studies would be needed. There is also a need to further investigate the potential for applying this type of approach in a student council. Students down to second grade have carried out the five-step approach in their classes, with support from the teacher. There may be problems related to this when it comes to maturity, and to which extent students may take responsibility for their own learning environment. Involvement and participation are prominent ideals in the Norwegian school system, but there is a need for more research on how this is to be carried out in practice.

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**Dr May Olaug Horverak** is currently a senior researcher at NORCE - Norwegian Research Centre (<https://www.norceresearch.no/en/>). Formerly at Birkenes Learning Centre, Norway, she has extensive working experience as a teacher and a headmaster. She has been the project leader of several intermunicipal projects related to mastery, participation and motivation, and recently has led a project on health promotion in school. She holds a masters degree in English and in special education, and a doctoral degree in English linguistics and didactics.  
Email: [mayh@norceresearch.no](mailto:mayh@norceresearch.no)

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