

Educational psychology counsellors' views about children's participation in educational decision-making: A thematic analysis

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Abstract

The attention to children's participation has increased dramatically during the last decade. Compared to the literature in the educational field, the literature on children's participation in the social and health fields seems to be developing rapidly. The aim of this article is to address the importance of educational psychology service (EPS) counsellors regarding special educational needs (SEN) students' rights to participate in educational decision-making. This article presents an in-depth study of seven Norwegian EPS counsellors' views about children's participation in educational decision-making. Procedures for a qualitative inductive thematic analysis were followed to reveal four key themes, namely, parents as key persons, children's presence on teams as an intervention, the importance of children's age for participation, and the gap between expert assessments and individual education plans (IEPs). The results, which are discussed in relation to Lundy's (2007) model of participation and other relevant literature, show that there should be more knowledge and interventions to ensure children's participation in educational decision-making in both research and practice. The results also indicate that structures and procedures in special education need to be considered and further developed from a participation perspective.

Keywords: Children's participation, Special education, Educational psychology services, Thematic analysis

1 Introduction

Children's rights are a political priority for both the United Nations (UN; through the United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF]) and many Western countries. Since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2019), the notion of children's participation, as advocated under Article 12, has been a hot topic in many countries. Children's participation has been described in the literature from both theoretical and empirical perspectives (Norwich *et al.*, 2006; Lundy, 2007, 2018, 2019; Quennerstedt, 2011; Gal, 2015; Uziely, 2015; Nir and Perry-Hazan, 2016; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

Moreover, the research literature, for example, regarding child welfare and social work, has discussed children's participation in practice, such as when children participate in decision-making processes or on responsible teams (Hart, 1992; Thomas, 2007; Vis and Thomas, 2009; Bache-Hansen, 2011; Sæbjørnsen, 2017). In contrast, there seems to be less research on children's participation in relation to special education and educational psychology services (EPSs) (Martin and Franklin, 2010; Prunty *et al.*, 2012; Paré, 2015; Uziely, 2015; Moen *et al.*, 2018; Economic & Social Research Council, 2019; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019). The aim of this in-depth study is to explore EPS counsellors' views of children's participation. Along with other relevant empirical literature findings, this study is discussed in relation to Lundy's (2007) model of children's participation. This model (Lundy, 2007) was chosen because it is helpful to identify blind spots regarding children's participation and EPS

counsellors' assessment in relation to special education and decision-making (Paré, 2015; Moen *et al.*, 2018; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

2 Participation

2.1 Children's Participation as Outlined in the UNCRC

Children's right to participate originates from the UNCRC, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989. The UNCRC contains 41 articles and is seen as a revolutionary child rights document because of its explicit focus on 'the best interests of the child' and its ratification by virtually all countries of the world, with the exception of the US (Gal and Duramy, 2015; Urinboyev *et al.*, 2016: 523). By ratifying the UNCRC, countries officially make a commitment to ensure that children are treated as claim-holders, that they have fundamental rights as individual persons, and that parents, other adults and state (and educational) authorities are the duty-bearers. The ratification of the UNCRC means that these countries have an obligation to enact these rights (Urinboyev *et al.*, 2016: 523). In the 1989 UNCRC, children are portrayed as separate human beings with individual needs, thoughts and feelings (Gal and Duramy, 2015).

Moreover, the need to ensure the education and participation of disadvantaged and marginalised children and young people is outlined in the Committee on the Rights of the Child (1997). The committee discussion underscores that children who may be disadvantaged and/or marginalised may suffer a double denial because of a deeper inability to accept the child's competence (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997; Lundy, 2007: 935; Martin and Franklin, 2010).

2.2 The Emergence of Participation

Since the adoption of the UNCRC, the concept of child participation has influenced laws, education, health practices and public discussions (Thomas, 2007). The concept covers child-inclusive themes and processes in various areas, such as schools, child welfare, justice, family disputes, courts, and public and policy research (Bache-Hansen, 2011; Gal and Duramy, 2015; Danielsen, 2017). At the same time, the implementation of the term ‘child participation’ presents both theoretical and practical challenges (Bache-Hansen, 2011; Gal and Duramy, 2015). These challenges seem to be due to different uses and understandings of the term ‘participation’, both in the research literature and in practice (Lundy, 2007, 2019; Bache-Hansen, 2011; Gal, 2015).

Since 1989, several participation models have been developed. The emergence of participation began with Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of citizen participation’ (Gal and Duramy, 2015: 7). Inspired by Arnstein’s (1969) work, Hart developed a revised ladder of participation in 1992, which consists of eight rungs, from non-participatory practices to child-managed projects. Hart’s (1992) model was the first model that conceptualised and discussed how children’s participation can be implemented. His model also contributed to identifying manipulative methods to involve children in processes that use them as decorations or through tokenism.

Next, influenced by Hart’s model, Shier (2001) proposed a five-level model that does not include non-participatory encounters. Shier’s (2001) model focuses on conceptual issues, processes and methods of involving children in community development projects. Finally, Gal’s (2015) ecological model indicates that children’s participation is also affected by several factors, such as issues related to the individual child and his or her family, the state and community structures, cultural values, and global human rights norms. Her model also incorporates

contextual factors that also emphasise the importance of studying children's participation in different cultures and environments (Gal, 2015; Nir and Perry-Hazan, 2016).

2.3 Lundy's Model of Participation

In 2007, Professor Laura Lundy developed a new model focused on conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC. The reason for developing another model within this field was due to the confusion regarding the full extent and scope of practitioners' obligations to ensure that the rights of children or young persons to participate are fulfilled (Lundy, 2007; Kennan *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, Lundy's model was developed to aid educational practitioners in meaningfully implementing a child's right to participate by helping them focus on the distinct but interrelated elements of the right, as embodied in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Kennan *et al.*, 2018). Lundy's (2007) model consists of the following four chronological steps to realise children's participation: first, *space*, children must be given the opportunity to express a view; second, *voice*, children must be facilitated to express their views; third, *audience*, the view must be listened to; and fourth, *influence*, the view must be acted on, as appropriate. Lundy (2007: 933) claims that the model reflects interrelated elements and that there is a significant degree of overlap, for example, between space and voice and between audience and influence. She also argues that Article 12 has an explicit chronology because the first stage in Article 12 emphasises the child's right to have his or her view given due weight. Thus, she concludes that once children are informed of the extent of the influence of their view, the process can begin again (Lundy, 2007: 933). Moreover, Lundy (2007) notes that Article 12 can be understood fully only in light of other relevant UNCRC provisions, such as Article 2 (non-discrimination), Article 3 (best

interests), Article 5 (right to guidance), Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information), and Article 19 (protection from abuse) (Lundy, 2007: 933).

2.3.1 Space

According to Lundy (2007), UNCRC Article 12 implies that there must be an opportunity and a space in which children are encouraged to express their views so that they can engage in decision-making processes. Moreover, Lundy (2007) emphasises the state's responsibility to ensure children the right to express their views. As a first step in realising children's participation, one should ask which matters children consider to have an impact on them or how they would like to be involved in influencing the outcome of decisions (Lundy, 2007: 934).

Furthermore, Lundy (2007: 934) refers to UNCRC Article 12, which states that participation is a right, not a duty, and claims that children should also be asked whether they want to participate in different matters that may affect them. Moreover, Lundy (2007: 934) claims that there must be a safe space offered to children in which to participate, which is important to make children feel secure so that they can express themselves without any fear of reprisal (Lundy, 2007: 934). The space must also be inclusive to all children, irrespective of the children's, their parents' or legal guardians' race, colour, religion, sex, language, political orientation, social status, nationality, disability, birthplace or other status (Lundy, 2007: 934).

2.3.2 Voice

Lundy (2007) underscores that the right to express oneself is a right of all human beings. UNCRC Article 12 restricts this right in the phrase 'who is capable of forming his or her own views'. Children's right to express themselves is not dependent on their capacity to express a

mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form a view, whether or not it is mature (Lundy, 2007: 934). Additionally, Lundy (2007: 934) emphasises UNCRC Article 5, which states that adults, parents or guardians should act in children's best interest. Moreover, Lundy (2007) refers to UNCRC Article 13, which says that children have the right to freedom of expression, including the right to impart information either orally, in writing or print, or through any other media of the child's choice (Lundy, 2007: 934). However, Lundy (2007) notes that there are several obstacles to Article 12 because children may need practical assistance to express themselves, for example, through different interpreters or assistive technology.

2.3.3 Audience

Although we have UNCRC provisions, there is no guarantee that children's views are considered by the adults who are in the position to give them effect. Therefore, Lundy (2007) emphasises that children have a right to an audience and should be guaranteed the opportunity to communicate their views to a body with the responsibility for decision-making (Lundy, 2007: 937). Additionally, children express their views in many ways and not always verbatim. Thus, effective listening may also involve skilled adults who can adapt and support children in expressing their views (Lundy, 2007: 937).

2.3.4 Influence

Lundy (2007: 937) claims that States Parties are required to ensure that children's views are given 'due weight in accordance with their capacity'. However, Article 12 has been criticised as making it easy for adults to comply with various outward signs of consultation, but ultimately, they can ignore children's views (Lundy, 2007: 938). Although various models have been

developed to prevent children's tokenism and decoration (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007: 938), the continuing challenge is to develop ways in which adults can both listen and take children's views seriously. In addition, children do not have all the information about which decisions have been made, how their views have been considered and why certain action has been taken (Lundy, 2007: 938). Interestingly, Lundy (2007: 939) claims that although the implementation of Article 12 cannot be guaranteed, it can be monitored. One way to monitor its implementation is to establish procedural safeguards, which makes it uncomfortable for adults to solicit children's opinions and then ignore them. Such change may require a culture shift in school life in which children's views are not only valued but also seen to be integral and embedded within decision-making (Lundy, 2007: 938). Finally, Lundy (2007: 938) underscores that considering Article 12 in isolation is a mistake. She argues that Articles 12, 14 and 15 must be interpreted in relation to Article 5 of the UNCRC:

The import of Article 5 is that the adults' right to provide guidance wanes as the child matures and may eventually cease. Moreover, there are several other UNCRC rights, such as the right to freedom of conscience (Article 14) and association (Article 15), which can be exercised independently by a mature child. In some decisions, at some point, the adults' views may be irrelevant, and the child's view should prevail. In instances such as these, notions of 'consultation' and 'participation' are effectively redundant (Lundy, 2007: 938).

3 The Norwegian Context

Norway has inclusive and free education for all that is the basis of its compulsory system, which aims to serve and include all students in the same classroom, both students with special educational needs and ordinary students (The Education Act, [1998], Chapter 1). Compulsory education in Norway lasts 10 years. There are currently 624,000 pupils enrolled in public and private primary and lower secondary schools (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016: 27). Students who do not make appropriate progress from ordinary adapted teaching are entitled to special education, and the student's specific needs are addressed by an EPS (The Education Act, [1998], Chapter 5). The EPS assessment determines whether the student needs special education and what type of instruction should be provided (The Education Act [1998], Chapter 5).

According to The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2016), 7.9 per cent of Norwegian students in 2015 were subject to an individual decision through the special educational needs provision; this is just under 50,000 students. Almost half of the pupils who receive special needs education have been granted more than 7 hours per week. Furthermore, 68 per cent of the students who receive special needs education are boys. This situation has remained relatively stable over time (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016). Although many students receive special education, the literature shows that these special educational needs (SEN) students receive less attention in the educational system and in educational research than students without special needs (Prunty *et al.*, 2012; Haug, 2017; Nordahl *et al.*, 2018; Economic & Social Research Council, 2019; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

Although the UNCRC enjoys nearly global recognition, and although there is an almost global consensus on what constitutes children's rights, there are numerous challenges that exist

in implementing the UNCRC principles, especially concerning children's participation in special education (Martin and Franklin, 2010; Nordahl *et al.*, 2018; Langford and Loven, 2019; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019). A report from the The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children (2019) outlines several issues that need to be emphasised. These issues concern SEN students' courses and their appointments with an EPS for the assessment of their school and/or learning problem (Moen *et al.*, 2018; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019). Moreover, issues related to expert assessments and individual education plans (IEPs) indicate areas where children's right to participate has not been fulfilled (Paré, 2015; Moen *et al.*, 2018; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

3.1 EPSs and Procedures for Special Education Decision-Making

Norwegian EPSs are organised and seem to function in much the same way as EPSs in the UK, the US and other countries that have adopted the professional framework and theories of Western English-speaking cultures (Anthun and Manger, 2006: 259). Traditionally, Norwegian EPSs have focused their work on students by aiming to identify specific needs and providing advice to teachers and parents. However, Norwegian EPSs seem to suffer from the same problems as EPSs in other countries, such as heavy workloads, a minimal number of professionals, long waiting times before casework begins and a lack of ability to prioritise system interventions and prevention work and programmes (Anthun and Manger, 2006: 259–260; Gilberts, 2018). In recent decades, the national authorities in Norway have called for a competence rise in EPS, which emphasises continuing education within specific areas and systemic levels. University courses, labelled SEVU–PPT, were established so that the EPS staff could increase their formal competence (Moen *et al.*, 2018: 102).

There are no national guidelines regarding the demands of the educational backgrounds of the EPS staff. Currently, the service's disciplines may include special educators, psychologists and social workers (Moen *et al.*, 2018: 101).

EPS counsellors are mandated to perform assessments through testing, mapping and the observation of students with various learning difficulties, to give advice regarding children with special needs, and to support schools in developing inclusive environments and education. Laws and regulations impact their work, as they stipulate that EPSs should focus on both the entire system and the individual student (The Education Act, [1998], chapter 5; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). However, in principle, parents and authorised school personnel are free to refer any student with a problem to the EPS (Anthun and Manger, 2007: 290). When a student is referred, a chain of action that is regulated by national regulations and guidelines is initiated (The Education Act, [1998]; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). The first step for the EPS is an expert assessment of the student's problem to advise the teacher, the SEN student and the student's parents how to best adapt the student's education. During the EPS assessment period, the EPS gathers information about the student, for example, from the student himself or herself, the school management, the student's teacher, and the student's parents and/or other professionals from different occupational fields (references excluded to allow masked review). Based on the requested information about the student, the counsellors write an expert assessment in which the student's specific needs are addressed, and recommendations are made regarding the type of instruction that should be provided. In addition, because of the expert assessment, the headmaster is advised via a written individual decision (The Education Act, [1998], chapter 5). Next, the SEN student's teacher must work with the student and the student's parents to translate the content in both the expert assessment and the

written individual decision to develop an IEP that is in accordance with the SEN student's needs for specific help (The Education Act, [1998], § 5-3; § 5-5). According to section 5-5 of The Education Act [1998], the school must prepare not only a written summary of the student's education once every year, which is provided to the student, but also an assessment of the student's development. The student's development must be assessed based on the aims stipulated in the student's individual curriculum, i.e., the IEP. The school must send this summary and the assessment to the student or to the student's parents and to the municipality or county authority (The Education Act, [1998], § 5-5).

4 Study Aim and Research Question

Despite the development and requirements of international law, it seems that SEN students' views are neither consistently nor reliability incorporated into special education decision-making (Prunty *et al.*, 2012; Moen *et al.*, 2018). Although children's participation has become a global priority within various disciplines, we still need more knowledge about children's participation, both in education and practice (Quennerstedt, 2011; Gal, 2015; Nir and Perry-Hazan, 2016; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019), especially in relation to special education and how Norwegian EPS counsellors work to ensure children's and SEN students' participation in relation to Article 12. Thus, the primary purpose of this in-depth study is to contribute to EPS counsellors' understanding of children's participation. Therefore, the research question is *what are seven Norwegian EPS counsellors' views of children's participation?*

5 Method

This in-depth study used a qualitative design, and an inductive thematic analysis was implemented following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) approach. The seven participants in this study were enrolled in a further education programme for EPS counsellors initiated by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The programme took place at a university college in western Norway. Four participants were recruited in the initial recruitment period (2016), and two participants were recruited in the next period (2017). To recruit more participants for the study, the participants in the first and second recruitment periods circulated information about the study to their colleagues. This strategy yielded only one more participant. The participants were between 25 and 55 years of age. Their job experience varied from three years to more than 15 years, and their educational backgrounds were in either special needs education or psychology.

5.1 Ethical Considerations

The recruitment method, data storage plan, interview guide and ethical issues in this study were approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The participants also signed an informed consent form. To ensure the participants' anonymity, the quotes in the results section are identified with numbers. The quotes were translated from Norwegian to English by the author and then presented to the author's research group to assess the reliability of the quotes and whether the quotes appropriately described and reflected each theme.

5.2 Data Collection

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of four topics related to interprofessional collaboration, leadership, children's participation and special education. The questions asked

regarding children's participation were children's rights (UNCR, Article 12), measures for children's participation, and participation in relation to special education such as expert assessments and IEPs. Thus, the disabilities or learning problems that different SEN students have were ignored in the semi-structured interview guide.

The interviews lasted approximately 45-90 minutes and were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

5.3 Analysis

The key objective of this study was to explore EPS counsellors' views about children's participation. As mentioned, the author followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) procedures for an inductive thematic analysis, which means that the data were subject to a bottom-up analysis. Only phrases related to children's participation were considered to be indicators of subthemes and themes. To ensure the reliability of the data, the author followed Braun and Clarke's (2006: 83) six phases of thematic analysis. After a close re-reading of all interview transcriptions, the codes for each theme and subthemes were created. Then, a summary of each theme was written. Furthermore, the preliminary findings, which consisted of the themes, subthemes, quotes and coding schema, were presented to the author's research group. This procedure was used to ensure that the four themes reflected the analysis procedure and that they mirrored the participants' view about children's participation (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2016). Correspondingly, the associated pre-interpretations and interpretations that could have an impact on data analysis were discussed in the author's research group. Based on these discussions, critical issues concerning the code assignment, themes, subthemes and summary were emphasised. After this meeting, the author re-read all the codes and refined them by combining some and deleting other codes.

Finally, the thematic analysis revealed that the self-reported aspects of children's participation yielded 29 nodes under eight subthemes. These eight subthemes that follow formed four themes that captured the core aspects of children's participation in this population: (i) organisation and information as factors that influence participation; (ii) parents as spokespersons; (iii) various measures for participation, such as collaboration and settings; (iv) views on children's presence on teams; (v) differences in children's ages; (vi) children's maturity and severe cases; (vii) expert assessments; and (viii) IEPs. Next, the four themes were labelled as follows: parents as key persons; children's presence on teams as an intervention; the importance of children's age for participation; and gaps between the expert assessment and the IEP.

6 Results

The analysis revealed that although the participants in this study were familiar with the UNCRC and Article 12, they were less familiar with the theoretical framework for children's participation (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Gal, 2015). Many participants described children's participation as an additional element to their work rather than as the basis of or foundation for their work (Lundy, 2007; Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016). Thus, parents were considered to be important key persons to ensure children's participation. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the participants suggested various arenas, such as responsible teams, where children's participation could be improved. Moreover, the analysis showed that children's ages and needs were criteria that had an impact on their possibilities for participation. Children's participation in relation to expert assessments and IEPs were identified. The analyses revealed the following themes regarding counsellors' views about children's participation: (i) parents as key persons; (ii) children's

presence on teams as an intervention; (iii) the importance of children's age for participation; and (iv) gaps within and between plans.

6.1 Parents as Key Persons

The analysis revealed issues related to SEN students' participation in primary and secondary education. Several participants also provided examples from upper secondary school. Overall, a prominent aspect of children's participation was the role of parents as key persons in ensuring their children's participation. Moreover, the analysis also revealed various procedures for preparing for children's participation. Due to their heavy workload, the participants reported that they spoke more with the children's parents and less with the children themselves, for example, about why EPS counsellors were involved in the children's education. Furthermore, several participants claimed that in dialogues with the students' parents, they had asked parents to talk with their children about why they had been referred to the EPS and were being assessed for special education:

(...). To ensure children's participation.... very often parents play *that* role. (Participant 2)

(...). I think we have a job to do here...because we often speak with the parents. In many ways, parents represent their own children. I think that is obvious. It is often the parents' task to inform us about what the student means, if the student doesn't show up, but this procedure is off the record. You might say... this is an area where students do not always know their rights. (Participant 1)

The excerpt above illustrates that professionals often allow parents to take responsibility to ensure their children's participation. The quotes above also implicitly reveal an education system that does not clearly inform students and parents about their rights.

6.2 Children's Presence on Teams as an Intervention

The analysis revealed children's presence on teams as a prominent aspect in facilitating their participation. The participants aimed to use various meeting places so that they could more easily have conversations with SEN students, such as in meetings with responsible teams. They also conveyed that such teams should be better organised according to the child's best interests and needs. The participants mentioned various suggestions for organising teams, such as a establishing a time schedule that could be adapted to the specific child's needs or holding a pre-meeting before everyone else involved meets as a team:

Sometimes, the student can join the team for a little while, and if the student doesn't want to stay during the whole meeting, *we*, the professionals, have to ensure that *someone at that meeting, in that team*, has a specific responsibility to ensure that student's voice [is heard]. (...) (Participant 2)

6.2.1 Experiences of Children Participating on Teams

Interestingly, as teams were regarded as one possible venue to ensure children's participation, the analysis revealed that children's presence could also have an impact on the professionals' collaboration, for example, in relation to the climate and mission:

If children participate in such teams, I think this could affect our collaboration in some way. On the one hand, we would not feel so free to speak about the child's needs or disabilities, but on the other hand, our focus would be on that child's development and future possibilities. Therefore, when a child attends a team, you will have to adjust or adapt to the situation with carefully considered answers... Maybe focusing more on solutions rather than describing his/her situation and all other difficulties. (Participant 3)

Maybe we get another focus if a child is present in those teams. We get a greater reminder what this is *about* and with whom we should collaborate. It became more obvious or clear to us then. (Participant 2)

The above excerpts convey that the professionals respected children's needs and that the children's presence on teams could affect and clarify their work:

Often, the meetings consist of what we, professionals and/or parents, *think* what the child's opinions are. Maybe it's because it is a little child, like a seven-year-old child. But when they are older, like students at a lower secondary school, I try to get them with me at meetings, because I have experienced that many of these students never have been told why they, for example, will receive special education or an IEP. (Participant 1)

(...). We must ensure that the student has a choice, according to how much he or she wants to say or to contribute. We must check and give them a chance, give them an opportunity to have a voice. (...). A student that I had previously described the importance of having a voice in teams. She said that every professional talked and talked and that they (professionals) had an idea of what would be the best intervention for her,

without even asking her. Therefore, I feel... that we have a *responsibility* to ensure children's participation in teams. (Participant 6)

These excerpts not only illustrate that the professional(s) paid attention to children's participation but also implicitly indicate that there were various routines and norms regarding how children were informed and how they could actively participate in the issues that affected them.

6.3 The Importance of Children's Age and Maturity for Participation

The analysis revealed the students' age and maturity to be important factors that had an impact on the participants' views on participation. Several participants described the issues related to differences in age, maturity and the severity of the case:

(...). Children's participation when meeting counsellors from EPS.... It is special in *one way* you know. The differences in ages, for example, between a seven-year-old and a twelve-year-old, *that* plays a role in relation to the fact that children should be informed and that children should participate. Therefore, you can say that each children's age and maturity adjust the flow of information. (Participant 2)

(...). They should always get the opportunity to participate, unless it is a very special case (a severe case), where I need to speak with teachers and parents first. If so, I report the outcome of that conversation to the child. (Participant 5)

Moreover, the participants paid attention to the UNCRC 12, nos. 1 and 2, and at the same time, they underscored children's right to participate being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity:

You always must consider how much a child really can understand of all the information her or she gets... However, of course, during a meeting, they can always join in some parts. (Participant 3)

Regarding upper secondary school students, the participants claimed that students of this age could express themselves more easily:

(...) often, students need to be at the upper secondary level before they can express themselves or have thoughtful proposals in such circumstances. (Participant 4)

6.4 Gap between the Expert Assessment and the IEP

The analysis revealed the expert assessment and IEP as two aspects linked to children's participation. In fact, the participants reported gaps within and between the two types of plans. Despite the awareness of the substantial increase in attention to children's right to participate, both in relation to education issues and special education issues, several participants claimed that participation itself could not necessarily guarantee younger students' understanding of why they were being assessed through expert assessments and IEPs. The participants emphasised the importance of giving SEN students the opportunity to be informed and to have a say during expert assessments. The following excerpt describes this sentiment:

You cannot monitor... supervise or map a student's needs or learning problem without the student's agreement... You will not be able to gather enough information about a student, what she or he struggles with... (Participant 4)

Correspondingly, several participants reported various challenges. For example, they explained that specific recommendations and interventions in the expert assessments are not necessarily followed in the IEPs. Several participants noted this type of gap between the two different plans:

In that phase, we may not do so well. For example, we might have given the student some recommendations (in the expert assessment), and afterwards, we do not follow-up with the student by asking him or her if he/she think this intervention or measure was ok. Maybe we do not manage so well in that phase due to heavy workload, and maybe we think that to follow-up with the student in this phase, after the expert assessment has been signed, that is the schools' responsibility. (Participant 7)

Furthermore, the participants reported differences in engaging children's participation in relation to academic disciplines and social skills as formulated in expert assessments and IEPs. Interventions related to SEN students' academic disciplines were reported to often be outlined, similar to a demand or a receipt, while interventions related to SEN students' social skills were given more weight:

(...). For example, I think interventions related to academic disciplines more often are told/demanded to students, given like an instruction, rather than being focused on students having a voice and meaning in such circumstances. Regarding social skill interventions, we are more likely to explain why we recommend this and that and let the student have a say in relation to this. (Participant 6)

7 Discussion

This in-depth study focuses on seven EPS counsellors' views about children's participation, particularly the participation of SEN students, regarding special education decision-making. The obtained results are discussed in relation to Lundy's (2007) participation model and other relevant literature on children's rights (Harding and Atkinson, 2009; Quennerstedt, 2011; Lansdown *et al.*, 2014; Gal, 2015; Uziely, 2015; Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016; Moen *et al.*, 2018; Nordahl *et al.*, 2018; Kennan *et al.*, 2018; Langford and Loven, 2019; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

The results in this study may open new areas for research and practice in matters that affect SEN students. First, the results show that the participants were familiar with and had a good understanding of children's rights. However, following UNCRC Article 12 in practice seems to be a challenge. Second, engaging SEN students' participation was conducted in various ways (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007). Third, there were differences in addressing participation based on age, maturity and the severity of the case. Fourth, gaps between expert assessments and IEPs were also noted as an important consideration.

Although there can be other reasons for EPS counsellors performing the assessment by collaborating with parents, such as issues about a child's early development, the results of the

first theme (parents as key persons) show that due to workload, counsellors often collaborate with parents. Many participants suggested that collaboration with parents was one way to ensure children's participation because parents represent their children. This result supports similar studies, such as those of Moen *et al.* (2018) and Anthun and Manger (2006, 2007), who claim that workload is one of several obstacles for the EPS population. Parents acting as spokespersons for SEN students is common. Many teachers, educators and professionals from different occupational fields struggle to understand the views of SEN students because of these students' difficulties in communication and social interaction and the belief that SEN students may not know what they need (Harding and Atkinson, 2009; Martin and Franklin, 2010; Uziely, 2015). However, the literature has shown that SEN students want the opposite; they want to have a say, but their participation often depends on parents or professionals' decisions (Harding and Atkinson, 2009; Uziely, 2015; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019). The findings in this study indicate that adults set the stage and define the agenda for participation. This result points to two aspects. First, children's rights should be given more weight. Second, professionals' knowledge and skills related to various interventions that can facilitate SEN students' rights to participate should be carefully considered, for example, in special education Bachelor's and Master's programmes (Lundy, 2007; Lansdown *et al.*, 2014; reference excluded to allow masked review). Moreover, the results of the first theme implicitly indicate that EPSs, as organisations, should be better organised to prioritise children's rights as set forth in Articles 3, 5, 12, 14 and 15 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007; UNCRC, 2019).

The results of the second theme (children's presence on teams as an intervention) mirror the importance of having a meeting place and a platform to engage children's participation. This finding corresponds to XXX (reference excluded to allow masked review), who claim that such

teams serve to meet the requirements established in Articles 3 and 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2019). The same result is also consistent with the *space* component of Lundy's (2007: 934) model of participation, which underscores that there must be an opportunity and a safe space in which children are encouraged to express their views without any fear of reprisal. Interestingly, the findings of this theme also reveal that when SEN students join teams, it has an impact on professionals' collaboration due to their focus on their cases. This finding supports a similar study (reference excluded to allow masked review) in which children's presence on responsible teams facilitated interprofessional collaboration. Moreover, the results of this study indicate the pros and cons of using teams to support children's participation. On the one hand, the participants alluded to the importance of adjusting teams to fit SEN students' needs and the impact that SEN students' presence had on the participants' collaboration and progress. This result supports the findings of similar studies related to child welfare services in which children's participation in decision-making processes has been emphasised (Bache-Hansen, 2011; Sæbjørnsen, 2017). On the other hand, children's presence on teams could also introduce limitations for the participants, for example, when dealing with different issues related to the students' problems. However, this result also indicates that professionals should be educated in interventions that facilitate children's participation. According to Lundy (2007), effective listening involves skilled adults who can adapt and support children in expressing themselves.

The results for the third theme (the importance of children's age for participation) show that age and maturity have an impact on participants' views regarding children's ability to participate. These results are consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2019), which differentiates based on age and the right to be heard. Notably, Article 12 (UNICEF, 2019) states that participation is a right and not a duty for children (Lundy, 2007). However, several

participants in this study referred to severe cases, which seemed to affect their assessments regarding children's participation. In such situations, they addressed the specific dilemma in relation to ethical considerations, such as what would be best for the child. These results are in accordance with Lundy's (2007, p 938) claims that Article 12 (UNICEF, 2019) must be seen in relation to other articles, such as Articles 3 and 5.

Finally, the results of the fourth theme (the gap between the expert assessment and the IEP) show that when SEN students receive interventions as formulated in plans such as an expert assessment and IEP, they are not consistent regarding children's participation. This result is in line with Lundy's (2007: 937) findings who claims that although various models have been developed to prevent children's tokenism and decoration, the challenge is to reveal how adults can both listen to and take children seriously. In addition, according to Lundy (2007: 937), children do not always receive the necessary information about the decisions made in the formulation of plans, how their views have been considered and the reasons why certain actions have been taken. In light of the results regarding this fourth theme and the work of Lundy (2007: 937), the procedures related to children's right to participate when formulating expert assessments and IEPs should be better monitored (Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016). Thus, it will be difficult for organisations such as schools and EPSs to solicit children's opinions. Another result of this theme, concerning IEPs, indicates that the participants had various procedures to give SEN students the opportunity to express themselves. This finding suggests that engaging and addressing children's participation in the formulation of plans, such as expert assessments and IEPs, should be further developed, both in research and practice.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This in-depth study employed a qualitative design and inductive thematic analysis by following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) approach. This study also had a small sample. Thus, the findings are not generalisable to the EPS population, the SEN student population or special education. However, the results from this study suggest possibilities for future research. Overall, the results show that the participants in this study were aware of and possessed a good understanding of children's rights. However, the findings regarding their ability to ensure this right appear to largely support other relevant studies (Quennerstedt, 2011; The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, 2019).

Several key points could be further investigated in future research. First, children's rights should be a central topic and cornerstone in the disciplines related to teacher education, special education and psychology. Second, professionals should be better trained in communication and interventions with SEN students regarding how to address issues related to regarding children's participation, for example, in severe cases. Third, children's participation in the formulation of plans, such as expert assessments and IEPs, should be monitored.

Because this study took an inductive approach, a deductive approach could be used in further research. Accordingly, inductive and deductive qualitative approaches can both indicate blind spots regarding children's participation in relation to special education that should be better understood. Finally, structures and procedures in special education must be further developed from a participation perspective.

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