
Democracy & Education

Places for Young People to Influence Decision-Making Developing Means for Democracy Education in Finland

Anna Suorsa (University of Oulu)

Abstract

This study examines young people's (ages 13–18) perceptions of their own opportunities to influence the development of their own environment through an experiment aimed at developing civic democracy in Finland in 2020–2021. The purpose of the experiment was to try out new ways of participating and influencing meaningfully for young people at school, to encourage young people to bring up grievances, and to support them in finding solutions that end up in decision-making. The experiment involved young people from different educational institutions (secondary school, upper secondary school, and vocational schools), teachers, and local decision-makers. Data was gathered with ethnographic methods by observation, video-taping, and keeping a field diary in the workshops and other events organized during the experiment. Inclusion and participation is examined through the experiences, activities, and interactions of young people and other actors participating in the experiment. Findings suggest that being able to focus on team discussions, creating a safe atmosphere, and providing suitable information during the tasks strengthened participation and experiences of inclusion during the experiment's lifetime. In addition, it was crucial to connect the activities to the development of existing decision-making structures, as well as to develop school routines, to enable more processual teaching needed in democracy education.

Submit a response to this article

Submit online at democracyeducationjournal.org/home

Read responses to this article online

<http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol31/iss2/2>

Introduction

DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING REQUIRES citizens to be aware of their own opportunities to influence and to want to use that influence both locally and nationally (Dewey, 2001; Hotaman, 2010). In many countries, including Finland, citizens' trust in decision-making is decreasing, and new ways of participating must be developed in order to make democracy a reality. The participation of young

people in the development of society is an essential part of this. Growing up as an active citizen takes place on two levels: On the

ANNA SUORSA (PhD) is postdoctoral researcher in the field of information studies, focusing on interactive knowledge processes enhancing knowledge creation, examining and participating in the co-creation of new practices to foster dialogue between decision-makers and citizens in Finnish communes. She has examined working practices of teachers and is currently examining interactive processes including young people and adults in different contexts.

one hand, a person must want and be able to take part in the development of their environment. On the other hand, society must create processes and provide experiences in which participation and inclusion are strengthened (Kiilakoski et al., 2012). According to studies, decision-making among young people is perceived as remote and official ways of participating are often difficult, but also, young people are active and eager to influence in various informal forums for participation and influence (Lepola & Kokko, 2015; Rytioja & Kokko, 2018).

Democracy education has aimed to provide children and young people with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in society (Hotaman, 2010; Sant, 2019). Supporting the inclusion of young people can therefore be based on making them aware of their own rights and demanding action to realize these rights (Kiilakoski, 2007; Hart, 1997). In Finland, practices and structures have also been developed to involve young people in decision-making through various consultation procedures and by developing, for example, youth council activities and regional inclusion groups (Lepola & Kokko, 2015). Such actions proceed from the idea of inclusion: Young people have an innate desire to understand and influence the world around them, and adults should find ways to encourage young people to develop their environment (Kiilakoski, 2007). However, there is a need to develop means to elaborate and discuss decision-making, change, and participation in the society among young people. Furthermore, there is a need to develop this in a way that connects youth to the practices and structures of decision-making in a real life, for them to participate in developing their own environments.

This study examines young people's (ages 13–18) perceptions of their own opportunities to influence the development of their own environment through an experiment aimed at developing civic democracy in Finland in 2020–2021. The purpose of the experiment was to try out new ways of participating and influencing meaningfully for young people at school, to encourage young people to bring up grievances, and to support them in finding solutions that end up in decision-making. The experiment involved young people from different educational institutions (secondary school, upper secondary school, and vocational school), teachers, and local decision-makers in one city. The research questions were:

- 1) What kinds of places of activity and interaction were developed for the participants?
- 2) How did the young people act and interact within the framework of the experiment from the perspective of participation and inclusion, and what challenges were experienced?
- 3) What kinds of demands on the decision-makers, teachers, schools, and society did the experiment cause?

Inclusion is examined through the experiences, activities, and interactions of young people and other actors participating in the experiment. The study pays attention to how young people's activities relate to existing structures and possibly develop needs to change these structures (Dreier, 2011). The activities are studied

from the point of view of creating new knowledge (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Tsoukas, 2009), which allows us to study participation as possibilities to interact and develop something new. This view also connects the activities to the processes of seeking, sharing, and using knowledge and information (Blandford et al., 2015), which are highlighted in the educational context of this experiment.

Theoretical Background

This research is based on the research traditions of participation, inclusion, and democratic citizenship, which are connected to the study interaction and knowledge creation in the field of information studies (Suorsa & Huotari, 2014). The starting point for examining participation is the perception of people as active actors in their own lives and environments based on hermeneutic phenomenology and cultural-historical theory of action (Suorsa & Huotari, 2014; Suorsa et al., 2019). Human beings are seen as dialogical beings who live and interact with other people and their environment, constantly evolving and at the same time inevitably developing their environment through interaction situations (Gadamer, 2004). Essential in the cultural-historical perspective, as well as in the phenomenological conception of interaction, is that people are understood as participants in these processes in such a way not only that they gain experience of inclusion but that their actions are seen as inherently influential (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, various training and educational measures can also be examined as cooperation and interaction between different actors. Likewise, the experiences and actions of different actors can be viewed as justified activities, thus allowing understanding in people's participation in activities from their own starting points (Dreier, 2011).

Development of new ideas and views can be viewed from the perspective of the creation of new knowledge and the formation of new information processes (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Tsoukas, 2009). The concept of knowledge creation can be used to examine the actions of those involved in their context: how new ideas and changes are developed in interaction. Creating new knowledge requires questioning and changing previous perceptions (Mitchell et al., 2009). The creation of new knowledge also always takes place in interaction, when encountering some new element, for example, a source of information or another person (Tsoukas, 2009). The ideal mode of the human relationships in the community aiming to create new knowledge is described as trustful (Bligh, et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2001), open (Mitchell et al., 2009), familiar (Adenfelt & Lagerström, 2006; Chua, 2002), and equal (Herman & Mitchell, 2010). This means that knowledge creation is enhanced in communities where people know each other and each other's ways of interacting and are free to express their own ideas and feelings. The development of such conditions is one of the prerequisites for the realization of inclusion, especially in interactive work of all kinds, including the field of education. In the context of schools, this relates to the study of interaction and collaborative methods of teaching and learning (Baker, 1999; Chi, 2009; Kirschner et al., 2008). Collaborative problem-solving, discussions, and joint understanding can also be seen as essential as the young people learn about democratic decision-making, and sharing experiences,

interests, and knowledge on societal topics is particularly suitable when developing democracy education. Viewing this from a knowledge creation research point of view gives us the means to understand social and structural phenomena, which may hinder or support collaboration and, in the best case, foster participation and inclusion.

Inclusion is viewed through the relationship between the individual and society: The individual has the right to their own identity and dignity as part of the family and community. Society, in turn, must enable this and create a framework for effective participation. (Kiilakoski, 2007). Inclusion can therefore be defined as opportunities to be a participatory and active citizen, to express one's opinions, and to participate in the processing and decision-making of matters through influencing a democratic society (Alanko, 2013). Inclusion involves the individuals' needs and opportunities to belong to and influence communities that are relevant to their own lives. Therefore, when talking about the inclusion of young people, we need to look not only at the needs and experiences of individuals but also at how adults in society support this inclusion. Influencing, however, is seen as a conscious change of circumstances, which inclusion provides an opportunity for. Inclusion is also related to pseudo-inclusion, if people are given opportunities to participate in discussions without it being relevant to the final decisions (Kiilakoski et al., 2012). In that case, experiences of inclusion can be offered momentarily, but in the long run, such activities erode trust (Lepola & Kokko, 2015). Therefore, it is important to focus not only on interaction but also on how it is connected to the whole decision-making system and its parties.

Young people's participation in decision-making can be viewed from two perspectives: through formal democratic institutions and by paying attention to young people's own, often informal, forms of participation and influence (Lepola & Kokko, 2015). Here, the study connects to the Finnish society and its structures. Various formal forms of participation in democratic decision-making have been created for young people in Finland, such as youth councils and student union activities. However, many young people feel that official decision-making structures are remote and alien to their own lives. Furthermore, they often feel that they can influence better through their own everyday choices, for example through shopping decisions or by using social media channels to express their own views. (Lepola & Kokko, 2015). Young people's knowledge and abilities to participate in practice also vary, and there is a need to share knowledge on the everyday practices, as well as communal and national structures of influencing on decision-making (Tenojoki et al., 2017). In this sphere of formal and informal participation, the role of schools is crucial, as a place for educating, sharing knowledge, and laying premises for developing into active citizens. Democracy education has a place in this development, and its role has been discussed in the field of education (Dewey, 2001; Sant, 2019). In this study, democracy education is examined as a context of developing new means in the Finnish school system, where educating active citizens is emphasized throughout the curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2014). As such, this view on democracy education is related to Dewey's (2001) ideas of school community as a micro society,

where students can learn how to be with other people, how to act and interact as a community. Simultaneously, this socializes people to the society, its power relations and structures (Alanko, 2013). In this study, new means for fostering open discussion and creating joint understanding of the ways to impact decision-making is examined in the context of secondary and vocational schools, where democracy education is focused concretely in the subject of social sciences (Opetushallitus, 2014).

Finally, experiments aimed at change can be viewed from the perspective of the realization of democratic citizenship as connected to local decision-making structures and internal and external impacts (Geissel, 2012; Smith, 2009). Internal impacts describe the deliberative nature of the action, such as the ability to discuss, the equity of debate, the production of opinions and information, and the level of knowledge of the participants on democracy. When developing new means for democracy education, one aim and desired impact can thus be the perceived and experienced changes in young peoples' views, experiences, and knowledge on the topics of the experience. However, the notion of external impacts draws attention to the effects on the decision-making system and the surrounding community. Hence, the views and experiences of other actors, such as teachers and decision-makers, should also be acknowledged, as well as the institutions and structures they are involved in. This highlights the importance of examining the phenomena in a systemic way, acknowledging all participating actors and the wider context. The system of this study, used in the empirical examination, is illustrated in Figure 1.

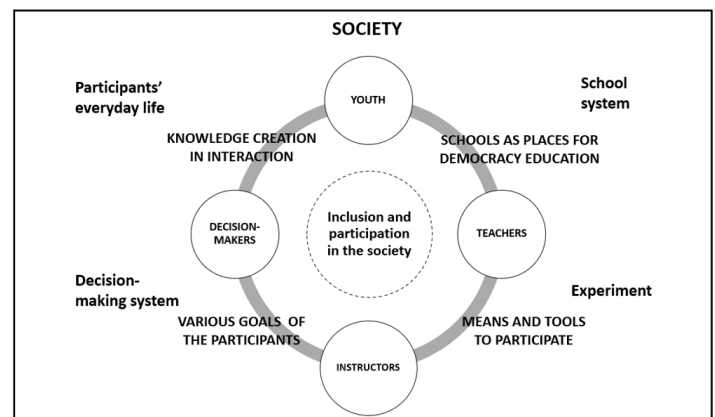


Figure 1. Systemic View of Examining Participation as Knowledge Creation in This Study

In this view, the borders between external and internal, as well as the context, are blurred, as seeing relationships as interactive allows us to examine the whole community of participants, each having their own goals, but also common objectives of participating in the activities in their own meaningful ways (Dreier, 2011).

Context, Methods, and Data

Context of the Research

This study examines an experiment related to the development of democracy carried out in a larger city in Finland in 2020–2021. The city had committed to the experiment in its own activities by

providing resources and opportunities for cooperation. The experiment had two instructors, who planned and executed the experiments. The experiment started in spring 2020, as pilot schools were recruited through an open call in the city. Five pilot schools from different regions of the city were selected by the experiment's instructors, based on the diversity and representativeness of the schools. At the same time, a call for decision-makers was launched, and all willing local city councilors and youth councilors were recruited. Before the start of the experiment's activities, discussion events were organized for the teachers from the pilot schools. In those events, the experiment was presented and the methods, schedules, and practices were discussed together. A separate event was held for decision-makers. In the spring, the instructors began the experiment on social media, and in May 2020, the activities in pilot schools began with visits of the decision-makers, arranged as remote via Teams due to the coronavirus restrictions in Finland. As the coronavirus situation in Finland eased in autumn 2020 and winter 2021, workshops could be carried out face-to-face at all pilot schools. The experiment included three means for experimenting participation among youth:

1. **Social media:** The Instagram account of the experiment shared ways to influence, gave tips on interesting influence-related events, and also organized live broadcasts.
2. **Decision-maker visits:** Decision-makers of the city council and the youth council formed pairs who visited pilot schools together. There was a total of eight visits, all but one of which were held remotely via Teams. These visits were attended by 633 young people, 13 decision-makers (seven city councilors and six youth councilors), and 40 teachers. The visits lasted from 45 minutes up to two hours. They included a short presentation of the experiment, after which the city councilor and youth councilor introduced themselves and talked about their own paths to the council. After that, the decision-makers either continued to discuss their own experiences of influencing or answered questions of the students.
3. **Workshops:** The workshops were carried out as face-to-face events in the pilot schools. There was a total of 17 workshops with 379 young people and 17 teachers (11 of the workshops are included in the data of this study). The workshops were attended by various groups and classes from secondary school, high school, vocational school, and student body. The workshops lasted two and a half to five hours each, depending on the schools' schedules. The workshops were carried out on each school's own premises. The workshops had three parts: (1) *I participate*, where the young people first wrote words about "inclusion, influence, and decision-making" on the notes on their own, and then, discussing them in small groups, put together a common poster that was presented to the class; (2) *We participate*, where the young people drew together what influencing looks like and how it can make a

difference; and (3) *How to participate*, where the instructors presented various channels of influence in the city and the young people wrote down initiatives to correct something that needed to be changed. All the phases included group work in small teams.

Research Data and Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used in the study, but the approach of the study as a whole is qualitative. The research data were collected during the whole experiment in 2020 and 2021 in a city in Finland, in all five pilot schools selected for the experiment: three secondary schools, one upper secondary school, and one vocational school group. The participants represented local young school children and students quite well: Participants from different grade levels and different educational institutions were involved. Also, seven city councilors and six youth councilors were committed to the activities, as well as teachers in all participating schools. The activities of the experiment were monitored ethnographically throughout the period, observing, videotaping, and writing a field diary in all meetings with the teachers and decision-makers, in decision-maker visits, and in 11 out of 17 workshops (selected so that all pilot schools were involved). In addition, the documents produced in all workshops were collected. After the workshops, participants were able to share their feedback in a survey. After the whole period of the experiment, the participating young people were able to reflect their experiences in the final survey. Teachers and decision-makers were asked about their participation experiences through qualitative surveys. The data sets are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Sets of This Study

Observation and video recordings	11 workshops in five pilot schools Eight decision-maker visits in five pilot schools Three meetings and training sessions organized by the instructors of the experiment
Survey data	Youth: Feedback survey on the workshop (161 responses) Youth: Final survey of the experiences in the experiment (91 responses) Decision-makers: Qualitative feedback survey (six responses) Teachers: Qualitative feedback survey (six responses)
Documents produced at the events	How Can I Make a Difference posters (79 pieces) What Influencing Looks Like drawings (79 pieces) Initiatives (79 documents)
Other material	Social media posts on Instagram Experiment's documents and plans

The data were analyzed focusing the places of interaction, modes of interaction, and experiences of participation of different participants, based on the conceptions outlined in Figure 1. Participation was seen as possibilities to take one's own path in the events examined, to open interaction, and to contribute to the joint

outcomes in the event. Furthermore, participation and inclusion were examined as knowledge and possibilities to impact on the actual decision-making processes. The conception of internal and external impacts of the experiment is viewed through the experiences of different participating actors and connections between individuals and the wider context and its structures.

Results

Possibilities and Realization of Participation and Interaction

The aim of the experiment was to encourage and involve participants in as open, self-motivated, and innovative an action as possible. This was achieved variably with three means: (a) social media, (b) visits of decision-makers, and (c) workshop activities. The analysis of the action and interaction revealed that these means for participating were used differently, and only in face-to-face workshops were the participants able to openly participate and contribute to the change. However, sharing knowledge and creating awareness was possible within all the means. All the means also had their challenges in balancing between open and knowledge-creating interaction and structures and practices, which restricted or narrowed down possible ways of being present in the events for some.

Social Media for Sharing Information

An important part of the experiment's community formation was its Instagram account, where the instructors actively shared information about forms of influencing, local events, and networks. From the perspective of interaction, Instagram sought to serve as a tool for creating and inviting people to participate in community in addition to sharing information. Instagram also enabled various interactive forms of activity, such as live broadcasts and activation of young people with various surveys, polls, and invitations. These were useful particularly as the coronavirus restrictions prevented physical gatherings in the beginning of the experiment period. It was also possible to organize hybrid events through Instagram live broadcasts, which could be followed either online or on-site.

However, young people did not participate in these offered places of interaction on a large scale. Although the experiment's instructors sought to engage young people in communicating and interacting in Instagram, as sharing their own experiences of influencing, young people did not seize this opportunity. This reflects the general attitude of young people toward the use of social media: In the workshop discussions and final survey, they reported that they actively used various social media tools, but mainly for following and private interaction. Public participation in discussions and sharing of one's own content was low. At the end of the experiment, the Instagram account had 413 followers, both young people and adults, interested in the theme. In the final survey, 10% of the young people who responded stated that they followed the experiment in Instagram, all rarely. Despite the lack of interaction, the use of social media can be seen as an important means for reaching out for external impact and sharing

information on the experiment and its topics both to other young people and adults.

Visits of Decision-Makers for Building Connections

The decision-maker visits formed the link between young people and local decision-makers and between junior and senior decision-makers in the region. As such, the visits offered a possibility to get to know local decision-makers concretely, and they reached their target group well—635 young people followed the decision-makers' visits in the pilot schools, as did 41 teachers. When analyzing the visits of decision-makers from the perspective of interaction and participation, it was evident that the events served as a meeting place between the city councilor and the youth councilor—they were able to get to know each other during the discussion. Some of the decision-makers planned the content of the visit together before the event, which further contributed to the development of the dialogue. Hence, through the visits and their organization, the experiment could strengthen the external impacts of the activities and contribute to the changes also outside the school context.

The use of Teams had an impact on the development of interaction. The video connection was usually only turned on by decision-makers and the instructors of the experiment, partly due to students' and schools' unstable internet connections. Thus, a more complete picture of the everyday life of schools and the perspectives of young people were missing from the picture. Hence, there was little interaction and participation in the events between the young people and decision-makers, and the events mainly provided young people with information on how to become decision-makers, how to make decisions, and how young people stand in the decision-making system. In one of the pilot schools, the young people had prepared questions in advance and presented them with their own voices to the decision-makers, which promoted interaction and mutual commitment to the event. Otherwise, teachers played a significant role in organizing the interaction at these events and they were mostly responsible for discussion from the school's part. The experiences of the only in-person visit at schools were particularly positive. However, the decision-makers and teachers mostly found remote visits easy to implement and participate in.

Workshops for Knowledge Creation and Participation

The workshops were the most important place of interaction and participation in the experiment, reaching approximately 375 young people in pilot schools in face-to-face interaction. They gave young people the space and opportunity to talk about politics and influencing, as well as to reflect on their own places of influence, encouraged by the instructors. The workshops went from the private to the general and communal level: In the first part, the words of influencing and one's own places of influence were considered both individually and in small groups. In the second part, the young people drew their own images of what influencing looks like in small groups, and in the third part, they wrote their own initiatives in the same group. In between the assignments, there were smaller reflection tasks led by the instructors (e.g.,

Kahoot quiz, Padlet assignment, word card task presenting forms of influencing), which varied slightly from one workshop to another.

In the workshops, the instructors of the experiment had control over what happened and how, and they managed the interaction, creating places of discussions but also giving orders and guidance if needed. Interaction between the instructors and the young people was mainly informal. The role of the teachers present in the workshops was not defined—they were allowed to participate in the activities if they wished. For the most part, teachers followed the events in the background, at the same time doing other work and, if necessary, intervening in disruptive behavior. However, in some classes, where the experiment's liaison teacher was present, the teacher's involvement was significant: The teacher could ask guiding questions and comments alongside the instructors. They could, for example, support proposals for giving additional information about the previous attempts to make changes at school and circulate in groups to discuss if, for example, there were difficulties in coming up with the topic of the initiative. However, the workshops worked mainly under the guidance of the instructors.

In the workshops, inclusion was built gradually, progressing from everyday influence to the community and official ways of influencing, as well as from private to general. The tasks and methods of the workshops highlighted the fact that young people were able to think about their own places, ways, and opportunities for influencing. These were opened up in joint discussions and proportioned to the information and views expressed by the instructors on influencing and political decision-making. In this way, the workshops made it possible to create knowledge together, offering different sources of information and emphasizing discussion. In addition, the idea of collective knowledge creation being boosted by bringing together a diverse group of people and views was experimented by mixing the young people when forming the small groups. However, this also had contradictory effects on the experiences of participation and on the actual outputs of the workshop, analyzed more in this paper's next sections. An additional prerequisite for interaction that creates knowledge is the necessary time and unhurried situation that allows discussion and gradual progression. In the workshops, this was well realized, and there was enough time to discuss, develop, and negotiate thoughts.

When examining participation in the workshops from the perspective of inclusion, it has to be emphasized that the experiments took place in a school environment. Thus, young people could not decide on their participation themselves. From the point of view of inclusion, the school context had both negative and positive consequences: The young people's power to decide in what ways and where to get involved was small. The school context worked well from the perspective of information sharing and learning, as the participants were not selected beforehand, and thus both those who were interested in influencing and those less interested were present. The participation of young people in various activities must be understood from this perspective:

Refusing to engage in activities or acting contrary to instructions in a school context was also an act of disobedience. Similarly, the desired ways of participation, listening, active participation, and doing tasks in a constructive way were partly attached to the school context. The various tasks also relied on the young people participating and sharing their views and experiences openly in the group in the spirit of creating new knowledge in a trusting and safe situation. Here, the structures and guidelines of the group work could be seen as supporting participation and providing opportunities to express one's own views and experiences in new ways. In particular, the fact that the participants had not been selected voluntarily also supported the implementation of inclusion at the local level in the school and municipality, as only a small number of young people had previously taken initiatives, for example, or heard about many channels of participation and influence. The workshops thus opened up the possibility for everyone to participate but also set boundaries for interaction.

Participation and Discomfort Experienced by the Youth

The analysis of the interaction and action in the workshops highlighted the kind of environment in which and with whom it is possible and meaningful to share ideas and develop them together. Some young people found group work with their class uncomfortable. In some of the pilot schools, the group division was carried out in such a way that young people could choose their own groups and in others in such a way that the groups were defined by instructors or teachers. In some cases, this had a significant impact on teamwork and the experience of inclusion: In groups that were already familiar, the discussion was freer and tasks were done together, while in groups with participants assigned from the outside, participation in the discussion was not always equal. In those kinds of situations, the instructors had a significant role in both guiding the interaction and forming the tasks to reduce the uneasiness. As a rule, they did not force the participants to share their views out loud, particularly when the task was to think about their own places of influence and feelings. In the activities, it could be seen that influencing could also be talked about on a more general level, and young people were usually allowed to choose for themselves how much private thinking and experiences they would give to the tasks. In this way, the joint work and interaction was different in the groups, and this was also reflected in the workshop experiences.

Despite the fact that the realization of participation and inclusion was very different in different groups, a large majority of the young people reported in a feedback survey conducted after the workshops that the workshop experience was, in principle, meaningful and opened up ways of influencing. About 70% of the respondents to the workshop feedback survey found participation pleasant on some level, while 18% disagreed. As a rule, the participants also felt that the activities in the workshops were even-handed and that they had the opportunity to participate in the work in a safe atmosphere. In particular, the young people felt that in group discussions they were heard and were able to participate in joint activities. More than 84% of the respondents felt at some level that in the workshop the opinions of others were

respected and listened to, and 67% felt that they were able to express their views. Both from the responses of the young people and from the observation of the workshops, it can be said that the methods of the project inspired the majority of young people to work in a group and that working in a group was considered natural. A large part of them also wanted to discuss influencing,

politics, and developing their own environment, for example: "It was nice to think about ideas in a group and when you could express your own opinion. The individual assignments weren't terribly nice." However, the results also showed that a small, but nevertheless significant, part of the 18% of the respondents felt that they could not get their views out in the workshop (Figure 2).

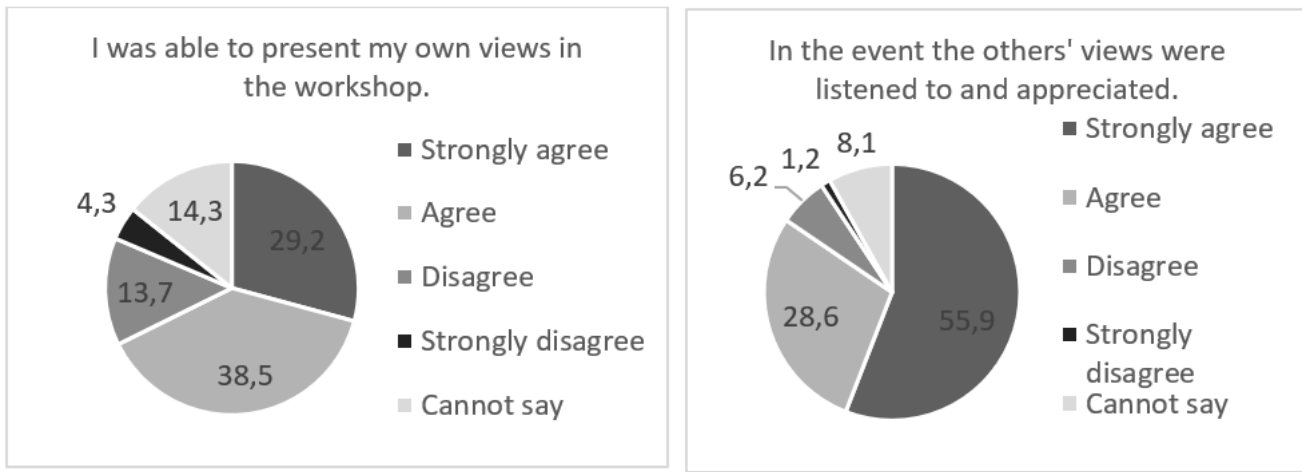


Figure 2. Experiences of Being Heard and Opportunities to Participate

This element of discomfort was also reflected in the open answers. The experiences of working in groups were diverse; some of the young people reported that it was nice to do discussion tasks if they could decide on their own group: "It would be easier to work with people you know; even though new people were nice, there would be more ideas with friends, and it would be easier to work with." The participants also found that the groups were different: "It was nice to do things in groups, but maybe in certain

groups you couldn't express your own opinion so well." At the same time, the workshops served as places for cooperation and discussion, and young people also gained experiences of both listening and being heard, but also experiences of the opposite. Hence, specific care should be paid to the working methods, and do so also on a more general level at schools. According to the participants, the discussions also helped to understand the politicians (46% agree; about 29% disagree), although not as much as their peers (Figure 3).

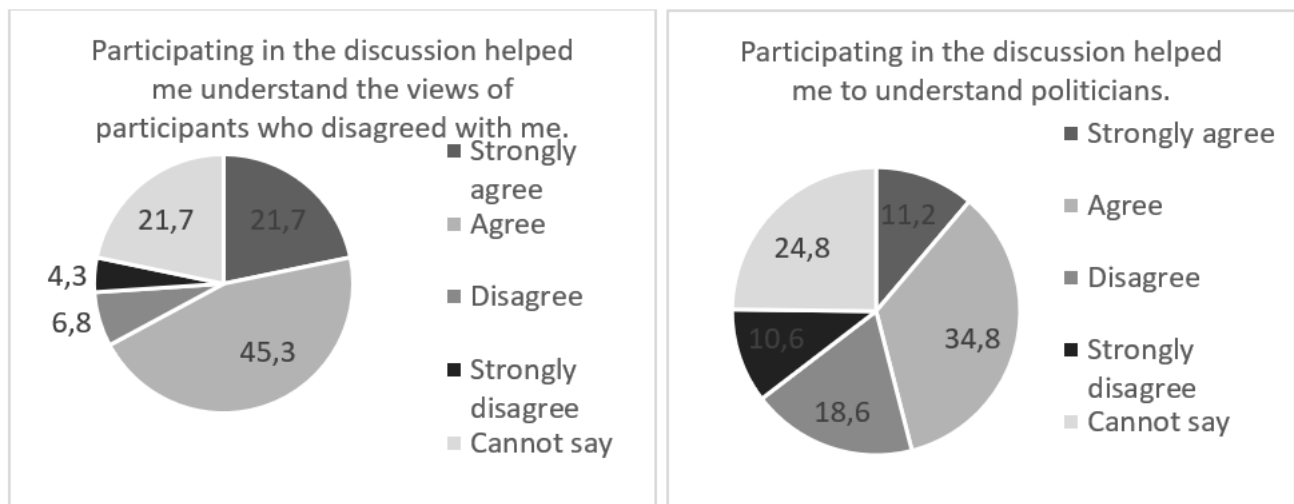


Figure 3. Participating in Discussion and Understanding Others

More than 40% of the respondents said that their interest in municipal decision-making had increased as a result of participating in the workshop, about 33% disagreed with this, and a significant number of respondents could not say. The workshops provided new information on influencing and decision-making, but it was not always easy for the participants to combine what they did in the

workshop with municipal influence. About 45% of the respondents felt that they had been able to genuinely influence the decision-making of the municipality by participating in the workshop, while about 30% were of the opposite opinion (Figure 4). It should be noted that the possible impacts of the initiative process had not yet been observed, and those might have affected these experiences.

The workshops inspired just under 30% to participate in politics and decision-making, while more than 40% disagreed with the statement. However, participation in the workshops was felt to have increased young people's awareness of their own opportunities to influence: About 85% felt that they had received more information about opportunities to influence in the workshops. It could be said that the workshops worked particularly well as awareness-raising factors, even if a participant did not feel that participation had increased their own desire to influence (Figure 5).

In the final survey, young people assessed their experience of the entire experiment. In these responses, 58% were positive descriptions of experiences and things learned, 9% negative, and just under 20% could not say. The positive responses highlighted the fact that participation in the experiment was generally fun. Some of the respondents had assessed their experience more closely, highlighting some of the activities: "I remembered from the experiment how young people can influence things and when a municipal initiative was taken with a small group," and, "I remembered the nice group work and games." Freedom and relaxation

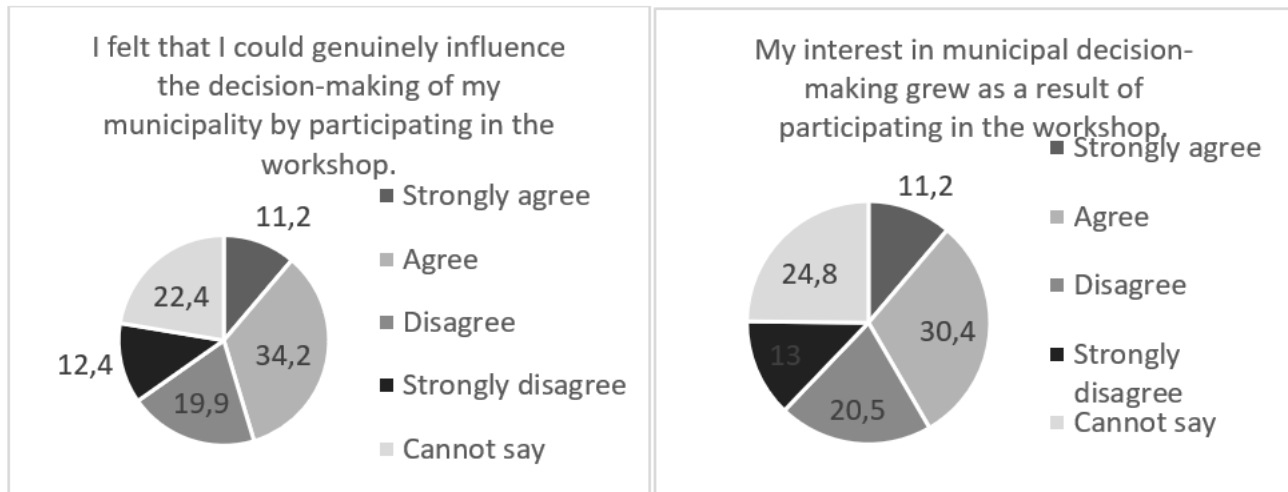


Figure 4. Experience of Influencing and Growing Interest

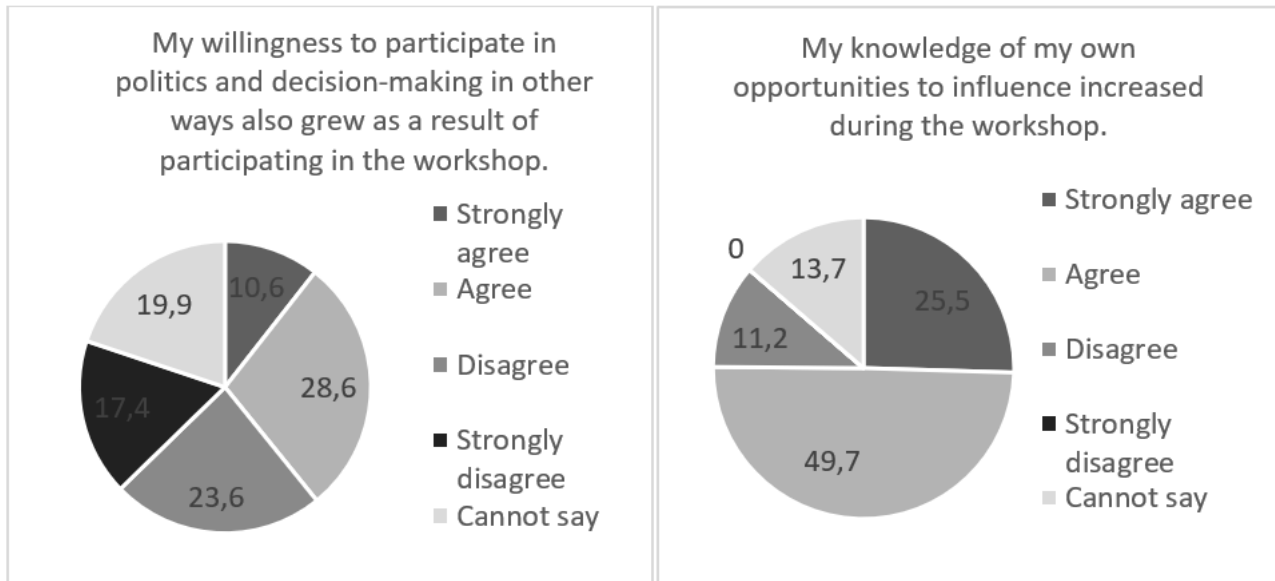


Figure 5. Perceived Changes in Knowledge and Willingness to Act

were appreciated in the experience: "It was nice to work in a group without pressure from the instructors. So it was easier to do the work when the instructors didn't put pressure on the students to do it," and, "I thought it was more of a 'tight' job, but it sounded more difficult [than it was]." Some of the young people also felt that they had received information and encouragement to influence: "The presentations were good and certainly raised many people's

interest in politics," and, "It was nice to see that influencing is not necessarily difficult." Some of the responses emphasized getting new information about the youth council: "It was nice when someone came to tell the high school about the youth elections," and, "It was also nice to be told about the Youth Council (I hadn't heard about it before)." In the negative comments (9%), hardly any reasoning was given. Some participants found the content boring

and the implementation uninspiring: “Politics is not so much of interest”; “It went on for too long”; and, “A little boring, there is no mind to solve the issues.”

Society and Decision-Making in the Knowledge Creation for Change

The theme of the strengthening of democratic citizenship was linked to young people’s previous knowledge and experiences of politics and influence. The starting point for the workshops was the young people’s own perspectives, and the methods used in the workshop had places for both thinking alone and joint development work. From the point of view of creating knowledge, this was a fruitful starting point, as the step-by-step progress brought out the perspectives of all participants. A common vision of these began to be built, and particularly during the writing phase of the initiatives, it was important that a theme suitable for everyone was chosen in the discussions and started to be discussed further. As such, the discussions and group work featured quite similar themes in all schools. Local themes weren’t much of a topic in the discussions and assignments that considered what influencing looks like and what it means to make an impact. These discussions featured international phenomena such as Black Lives Matter, Pride, Donald Trump, and various social media companies. Among the domestic themes, certain politicians and the economic situation, as well as climate change, were present. However, when the tasks focused on reflecting on initiatives, the themes came from close by, from one’s own school, leisure time, and regional development of public traffic and local environments.

The connection to the participation in the society was present most concretely in the last part of the workshop, when the participants were able to decide for themselves which theme they wanted to change through their own initiative. Young people were introduced to current topical themes in the city, to which they could devote their initiative if they wished, or they could choose another topic. The initiatives were written in a group, so the first part of the task was to form a common vision of the group. Based on the observation, in almost all groups, the initiative was eventually born as a result of group work based on the interests of young people themselves. However, many groups needed the help of the instructors or, in some cases, teachers in formulating the initiative. All of these had great variation between groups and classes, and both interaction skills and group dynamics, as well as views on social issues, had a significant impact on the work of the groups.

These discussions highlighted how much young people had information about the environments of their daily lives and the need for changes in many services. There was less information about which existing structures these services were related to. However, by talking with the instructors and in some cases also with teachers, the young people found a broader context and a target for their initiatives. The guidance also made it clear to the young people that their own goals and suggestions for changes were to be made visible and formulated as concretely as possible. Furthermore, the initiatives had to state reasons for the suggested changes, and these arguments were written into the initiatives largely at the request of the instructors. Here, finding suitable

references supporting the initiatives was usually a collective task for the participants and required using mobile phones, which evoked interaction, debate, and critical evaluation of information. As a whole, the creation of new knowledge on the issues to be changed in the workshop was affected by the methods used, as well as the joint discussions managed by the instructors. In every part of the workshop, the starting point was to think freely from the individual’s and group’s point of view and interests, but the instructors gave input to the discussions and suggested starting points for initiatives, if needed. This, in relation to the overall aim to bring local decision-making closer to the young people, had an impact particularly to the content of the initiatives.

Participation and Interaction Experienced by the Adults

Decision-Makers’ Experiences of Participation

The experiment had an influence not only among youth but also among the decision-makers and teachers participating in the process. From the point of view of decision-makers, participation was meaningful, as it was considered important to get to know young people’s perspectives and to inspire them to influence: “I want to get to know young people and young people’s issues and encourage young people to get involved in influencing. When I was younger, I didn’t get support or direction for my own social pain, so this is a really good thing!” The experiment made it possible to obtain information about young people and the school world and get new ideas for their own activities: “I am very interested in increasing young people’s awareness and activity in dealing with social issues. At the same time, I get in touch with young people and their life situation. Young people have a lot of fresh ideas about the content of politics.” Visits worked quite concretely by bringing decision-makers and young people together in a new way—some decision-makers reported that their contact with young people was otherwise limited, and there was a desire for more cooperation. The experiment also brought together the city councilors and youth councilors. Even if in the city there was a practice of organizing collaboration, and most of the decision-makers participating in the experiment were aware of it, cooperation had usually not been active before. During the decision-making visits, youth councilors and city councilors also learned about each other and got to know each other’s backgrounds and activities. Participation was a positive experience, but the remote events remained distant: “The time passed quickly. It was nice to share the experiences with the young people and also to hear about the youth councilor’s own decision-making path. The remote connection worked well, even though I couldn’t get any contact with the young people in the participating school,” and, “It was a bit strange to talk to the students in Teams when there was no idea what kind of group of listeners there was. (No video footage from the school was visible.) It’s a nice experience in itself.”

The visits of the decision-makers took place mainly before the workshops, so the decision-makers were not aware of the initiatives written by young people in the workshops. Some decision-makers hoped to be better informed about young people’s situations and wishes, although some information about these was also obtained through the questions asked by young people. The

decision-makers reported that the visits made them think about how much young people are heard in decision-making and what kind of challenges and interests young people have: “I would like to hear young people’s opinions on issues in decision-making. What do young people think about remote schooling, school network, hobby opportunities in [the city], mental health services, etc.” From the answers, it can be seen that participation was reciprocal and that the decision-makers also hoped for the opportunity to participate in the discussions with young people.

Teachers’ Experiences of Participation

Participating liaison teachers were usually teaching social sciences and history and were interested in developing democracy education in their own schools. Participating in the actual events organized by the experiment was challenging, however, due to the tight schedules and everyday life at school. Teachers were best able to participate in the decision-making visits and social media communication, while workshops took place during several lessons, as they were longer than ordinary social science or history lessons. For this reason, the teachers in charge of the experiment for young people were not, as a rule, following the workshops themselves except partly according to their own possibilities. Hence, there was only a little knowledge-creating interaction between the young people and teachers in the observed events. However, that gave the instructors more freedom to guide the events and also detached the event from the school context and from the young people’s point of view. However, these arrangements did not totally support joint knowledge creation and information sharing in the school communities.

Participation in the experiment took place mainly within the framework of social studies, but the activities were spread over several different lessons. In some cases, the topics of the experiment did not fit to the themes dealt with in the current course: “Participation took place mainly in social studies lessons, although the processing schedule did not coincide in quite the best possible way with the order of the topics per academic year (influencing as a whole will be handled in the spring of the 9th grade).” Teachers were able to be flexible with implementing the themes of the experiment to their current teaching. However, the initiative process proved to be challenging in schools, as school schedules and everyday life did not allow the initiative process to continue after the workshops. This was one major problem experienced in the experiment by the instructors and some students as well and reveals a challenge of using new methods for supporting democracy education at school context. However, the schools were able to solve this problem in different ways, and the initiatives targeted to the school environment were easier to put forward.

The practices and themes of the workshops were seen to be connected to the regular themes of teaching as such or with minor changes. The teachers recognized the significance of the experiment and wanted to organize an opportunity for young people to participate, even though the organization was challenging due to both the coronavirus restrictions and the busy everyday life at the school. Democracy education and bringing decision-makers to the school were considered important: “Active citizenship and

democracy skills will also be included in the future curriculum and very important skills. They are also subjects that make it easy to combine them with cross-curricular courses. The experiment gave us the opportunity to try out different ways of working and made it possible to visit a great decision-maker.” The schools also identified the experiment’s connection to other topical themes and the possibilities of utilizing the workshops in grouping: “At the upper secondary school, we felt that the experiment fits really well with the goals of the team period [we had going on].” Teachers found it challenging to adapt the participation to other schoolwork: “It made it difficult that my own lessons are of course also during the day, e.g., overlapping with the daytime stuff in this project.” Teachers also reflected on the differences between remote experience and face-to-face work: “The remotely implemented sections enabled students to participate perhaps more easily than in contact teaching, although for some young people this may feel distant. The event organized at the school involved the students more concretely.” Remote work practices developed due to the coronavirus made it a little easier for teachers to participate in the experiment’s planning and information sharing events, which were held completely remotely in Teams.

The content of the project was very satisfactory to teachers, but when they were asked about the development, they shared that the methods could be developed in the direction of assessing political knowledge. The need for this was also reflected in the observation of the workshops: The emphasis was on the existing knowledge and perceptions of the young people, to which the instructors provided new information in intermediate discussions and guiding interaction, challenged them to seek information to support their own arguments, and brought out broader topical, including local, themes. Linking themes to critical literacy and information literacy in a very concrete way at the task level was seen as an opportunity for development: “Maybe the thing we teach in school, e.g., how to keep a cool head, to stay sensible in the flood of information and news material on the internet, how to distinguish fakes from the real ones. How to do the right thing.” This highlights the broader connection of the experiment’s themes to the themes of inclusion and communality: The goal in supporting democratic citizenship is to understand how one’s own activities build common conditions, also from an ethical point of view.

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of the study was to examine the realization participation and inclusion from the perspective of the young people, teachers, and decision-makers. The focus was on the interaction and the possibilities to contribute. As a result of the study, it can be concluded that the experiment managed to involve local young people and adults in its activities, but focusing on interaction and participation revealed that there were challenges in developing suitable ways to participate for everyone. It was concluded that different forms of activity strengthened participation and experiences of inclusion during the experiment’s lifetime, but also challenges for participation were detected. Experiment actions on social media and organized decision-makers’ visits, mostly via

Teams, provided new information and offered pathways for reflecting one's own possibilities to impact societal change. However, these means did not support interaction, and young people reported that they received new information about decision-making from specially organized face-to-face workshops where they could develop their own ideas based on their own needs. As a whole, using different means ensured that there were different ways to participate available and that the impacts of the experiment were spread to the wider context (Geissel, 2012; Smith, 2009).

The systemic perspective of the research makes it possible to examine the objectives and results of the activities. The combined impacts of workshops, visits to decision-makers, and outreach activities can be considered as requirements imposed on the decision-making system by the developed awareness of democracy, the growing desire to influence, and the initiatives and other wishes for change. However, it is possible to see how the decision-makers' desire to connect with young people affected the whole system, as well as the wishes of teachers. In addition, the systemic view shows requirements to the school system and its structures, challenging the possibilities to include new methods for democracy education in practice. The system formed in the experiment, the methods used, and the main findings of the experiment are described in Figure 6.

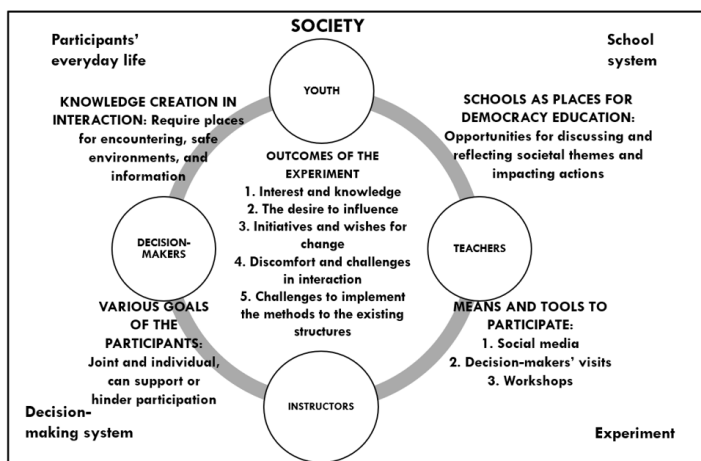


Figure 6. Activities, Impacts, and Changes Made by the Experiment's Activities

By focusing on creating new knowledge in social interaction through different activities, the study illustrates how different parties can come together and develop joint understanding. With the systemic view, it is also possible to see where the gaps of creating new knowledge are and how to develop processes, which promotes knowledge creation where young people's voices are also heard. Here, the study contributes to the study of knowledge creation by connecting organizational and official actors to the processes of citizens, such as young people. In addition, by examining the interaction between young people in workshops, it was possible to see how the individual and collective factors in the small groups could support or limit students' possibilities to participate. This is crucial, as new knowledge always requires questioning one's previous knowledge and expressing that one

does not know something (Tsoukas, 2009), as well as safe and equal environments (Cross et al., 2001; Herman & Mitchell, 2010). As well, the form of the experiment and the information provided by the instructors guided the formulation of ideas, and thus impacted the ways in which the initiatives were formulated. In addition, the structures of the workshop, starting from the individual and proceeding toward broader themes, influenced the topics of the discussions. In the future, it would be relevant to alter the settings and examine how knowledge creation would unfold in different settings.

The analysis of the experiment illustrated how the different goals of the participants, created knowledge, and the desire to influence were combined in cooperation between different parties. Here, the internal and external impacts (Geissel, 2012; Smith, 2009) were blended. The experiment stressed the importance of understanding who is being influenced and how one's own actions ultimately affect decision-making. Thus, seeing these effects was missing, as the initiative process was not solid. The activities provided opportunities for learning skills and becoming interested in decision-making, but it is important that the activities continue in schools, as the decision-making processes are long and the effects are generated slowly. Overall, the experiment focused on supporting the inclusion of young people in local formal environments and succeeded in highlighting links between young people and local decision-making momentarily, but keeping these links alive requires natural places for interaction. It can be concluded that there is a need to address the themes of influencing with methods that discuss and guide action in practice.

In this study, there are limits concerning the focus on one local context in Finland. However, some general implications can be derived, and the methods tested in the experiment are easily scalable to work in different environments. The experiments and activities for young people are well integrated into the schools' democracy education and social studies themes, but they also offer opportunities for multidisciplinary learning in different courses, such as mother tongue, communication, and interaction. The analysis of interaction showed that workshops and decision-maker visits can be made more impactful through a process-like approach, preparing for visits and designing interaction tools and ways to engage in dialogue, both in remote and in face-to-face visits. It is also essential to plan the initiative process and the monitoring of impacts in such a way that the consequences of one's own actions become visible. When school schedules are challenging, supporting young people's self-monitoring and finding out the results of their activities could be crucial—here, growing into an active citizen and developing motivation to participate are in a key role. The observation of the workshops also showed that a competent instructor who brings information and topical themes to the discussions plays a key role in the development of democracy skills and knowledge. Thus, the training of teachers and other instructors is essential. Also, multi-professional cooperation with youth centers could be developed. Furthermore, introducing new kinds of methods that require process-like activities into the everyday life of schools may necessitate a broader institutional change. Thus, the further study of democracy education and project-based

learning, which takes into account the possibilities to collaborate with other stakeholders, such as decision-makers, is essential.

It is also important to consider how inclusion can be further developed and built in each community—taking the perspectives of the other seriously (Gadamer, 2004; Suorsa & Huotari, 2014) allows the methods experimented in democracy education to be combined with broader themes, such as school's atmosphere, well-being, and safety. It is essential to foster the idea of inclusion as participation in the development of the common environment in a way that is meaningful to the individual. By highlighting the communality of influencing and decision-making, the individual's responsibility and influence on the development of their own community are also emphasized (Dreier, 2011).

References

- Adenfelt, M., & Lagerström, K. (2006). Enabling knowledge creation and sharing in transnational projects. *International Journal of Project Management*, 24(3), 191–198.
- Alanko, A. (2013). *Osallisuusryhmä demokratiakasvatuksen tilana—Tapaustutkimus lasten ja nuorten osallisuusryhmien toiminnasta Oulussa* [Inclusion group as a space for democracy education—A case study on the activities of children's and young people's inclusion groups in Oulu]. Juvenes Print.
- Baker, M. (1999). Argumentation and constructive interaction. In P. Coirier & J. Andriessen (Eds.), *Foundations of argumentative text processing* (pp. 179–202). University of Amsterdam Press.
- Blandford, A., Dominique Taylor, D., Smit, M. (2015). Examining the role of information in the civic engagement of youth. In *Proceedings of the 78th ASIS&T Annual Meeting: Information Science with Impact: Research in and for the Community*. American Society for Information Science, Article 21, 1–9.
- Bligh, M. C., Pearce, C. L., & Kohles, J. C. (2006). The importance of self- and shared leadership in team based knowledge work. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(4), 296–318.
- Chi, M. T. H. (2009). Active-Constructive-Interactive: A conceptual framework for differentiating learning activities. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 1(1), 73–105.
- Chua, A. (2002). The influence of social interaction on knowledge creation. *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, 3(4), 375–392.
- Cross, R., Parker, A., Prusak, L., & Stephen, P. B. (2001). Knowing what we know: Supporting knowledge creation and sharing in social networks. *Organizational Dynamics*, 30(2), 100–120.
- Dewey, J. (2001). *Democracy and Education*. The Pennsylvania State University.
- Dreier, O. (2011). Personality and the conduct of everyday life. *Nordic Psychology*, 63(2), 4–23.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum.
- Geissel, B. (2012). Democratic innovations theoretical and empirical challenges of evaluation. In B. Geissel & K. Newton (Eds.), *Evaluating democratic innovations: Curing the democratic malaise?* (pp. 209–214). Routledge.
- Hart, R. (1997). *Children's participation. The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. Unicef, Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- Herman, H. M. T., & Mitchell, R. J. (2010). A theoretical model for transformational leadership and knowledge creation: the role of open-mindedness norms and leader-member exchange. *Journal of Management and Organization*, 16(1), 38–99.
- Hotaman, D. (2010). Democratic education: A curriculum of democratic education. *Journal of Theoretical Educational Science*, 3(1), 29–42.
- Kiilakoski, T. (2007). Johdanto: Lapset ja nuoret kuntalaisina [Introduction: Children and young people as municipal residents]. In A. Gretschel & T. Kiilakoski (Eds.), *Lasten ja nuorten kunta* (pp. 8–23). Hakapaino Oy.
- Kiilakoski T., Gretschel A. & Nivala E. (2012). Osallisuus, kansalaisuus, hyvinvointi [Inclusion, citizenship, well-being]. In A. Gretschel & T. Kiilakoski (Eds.), *Demokratiaoppitunti, lasten ja nuorten kunta 2010-luvun alussa* (pp. 9–33). Youth Research Network.
- Kirschner, P. A., Beers, P. J., Boshuizen, H. P. A., & Gijsselaers, W. H. (2008). Coercing shared knowledge in collaborative learning environments. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24, 403–420.
- Lepola, O., & Kokko, V. (2015). Nuoret poliittisina toimijoina—Äänestäminen ei riitä [Young people as political actors—Voting is not enough]. *Näkökulma, 5. Nuorisotutkimuksen seura*. Nuorisotutkimuksen verkosto.
- Mitchell, R., Nicholas, S. & Boyle, B. (2009). The role of openness to cognitive diversity and group processes in knowledge creation, *Small Group Research*, 40(5), 535–554.
- Opetushallitus. (2014). Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014 [Basic education curriculum 2014].
- Rytöja, A., & Kallio, K. P. (2018). Opittua käsitteistöä vai koettua yhteiskunnallisuutta? Pohdintoja nuorten kansalaisuudesta politiikkakäskyjen valossa [Learned concepts or perceived sociability? Reflections on youth citizenship in the light of policy surveys]. *Sosiologia*, 55(1), 6–27.
- Sant, E. (2019). Democratic education: A theoretical review (2006–2017). *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 655–696.
- Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic innovations: Designing institutions for citizens participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Suorsa, A., & Huotari, M.-L. (2014). Knowledge creation and the concept of human being—A phenomenological approach. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 65(5), 1042–1057.
- Suorsa, A., Suorsa, T., Svento, R. (2019). Materiality and embodiment in collaborative knowledge processes: Knowledge creation for a virtual power plant. *Information Research*, 24(4), paper colis1930.
- Tenojoki, A., Rantala, J., & Löfström, J. (2017). Koulussa vai koulun ulkopuolella? Nuorten kokemukset yhteiskunnallisen vaikuttamisen oppimisesta. In E. Pekkarinen & S. Myllyniemi S. (Eds.), *Opin polut ja pientareet. Nuorisobarometri 2017* (133–148). Nuorisotutkimusseuran verkkojulkaisu.
- Tsoukas, H. (2009). A dialogical approach to the creation of new knowledge in organizations. *Organization Science*, 20(6), 941–957.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.