Student-teacher dialogue for lesson planning: inclusion in the context of national policy and local culture

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper reports on the findings of an Erasmus project entitled ‘ReHaRe’ (Reaching the Hard to Reach). The aim of this project is to develop more inclusive learning environments. The project adopts an action research approach and gives school pupils a role as researchers who plan, evaluate and develop lesson plans in collaboration with their teachers. The paper describes the way in which this collaboration can increase the degree to which pupils participate in the planning of their teaching, including pupils who are normally regarded as being hard to reach. However, this action research approach also generates ethical dilemmas, especially when children are at the centre of inquiry. Equal partnerships in research (in this case teacher-pupil equality) require reflection on the underlying ideas of the teacher-pupil relation and an awareness of how these ideas affect collaboration, especially when teachers insist on maintaining their dominant role over pupils. The paper concludes that inclusive inquiry (which was the approach taken in this project) can expand participatory opportunities for children who are otherwise regarded as being on the margins of the education system. However, successful inclusive research also requires an understanding of the role of local professional cultures at schools.

This paper reports on the findings of an Erasmus project entitled ReHaRe (Reaching the Hard to Reach). This is a three-year collaborative action research project that involves schools and universities from the UK, Portugal, Spain, Austria and Denmark. The overall aim is to improve the practice of teaching and to develop more inclusive learning environments in which every child can participate, develop and learn. The research project focuses on children’s involvement as researchers in the development of teaching practices. In each of the five countries, six schools have participated using a new approach called ‘inclusive inquiry’. The inclusive inquiry approach emerged from earlier research by Messiou et al. (2016).

Recognizing the impact of national traditions in a cross-national study such as this one, this paper focuses on the six Danish schools that participated in the project. These schools all operate within the same national educational policy and are situated in the same area in Denmark. However, the degree of genuine democracy practised in the dialogue between the pupils and teachers varied considerably, as did the cultures of the schools in question. In this paper, we analyse these differences with a focus on the influence of local professional cultures on the development of inclusive policies. The overall argument is that local professional cultures are key components for understanding the relation between educational policy (in this case, policies about inclusion) and practice, and for understanding how to conduct action research (especially research involving children).

The paper is divided into two main sections: In the first section, we introduce the Erasmus+ project, ReHaRe, its overall aim and methodologies. In the second section we convey two analyses: The first one emphasizes how inclusive inquiry have the possibility to expand participation for all children and in the latter we describe some of the more problematic aspects of this kind of action research.

**The study: ReHaRe**

The Erasmus+ project entitled ReHaRe draws on an approach to inclusion whereby inclusive education is ‘concerned with all children’s presence, participation and achievement’ (Booth and Ainscow in Messiou, 2016, p. 148). In the Nordic and European countries, school reforms seeking to transform segregated school systems have been on the agenda since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Haug 2000). The aim of such reforms has been to create a school system based on democratic-oriented principles of participation for all in general education. The argument for pursuing such reforms has been based on values such as social justice and equity. In other words, inclusive education is intended for all children, not just for some. The point...
of departure for our research on inclusion issues is the organizational paradigm (Clark et al., 1995) in an attempt to identify features in schools that facilitate responses to diversity. This paradigm emphasizes the organizational and institutional conditions within schools that either facilitate or hinder participation for all. This approach is influenced by a sociological critique of segregated schools, a critique that highlights injustice, marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Skrtic, 1999; Slee, 2011; Tomlinson, 1982).

With the ambition of creating social justice and in schools, the methodology of ReHaRe suggests focusing on how to develop inclusive learning environments. As emphasized by the Danish professor of inclusive education Susan Tetler, there has been far more focus on the reasons for inclusion than on the way in which inclusion can actually be practised (Tetler, 2015). Clarke, Dyson and Millward argue that the research debate on inclusive education has tended to view special educational needs as a product of societal processes and structures (Clark et al., 1998, p. 158). From this perspective, needs arise from social problems, and these needs presumably disappear if the social problems which cause them are solved. This perspective has both challenged and reoriented many fundamental assumptions. However, as Clark et al. (1998) point out, this more sociologically oriented perspective has not questioned whether principles of equity and inclusion work in practice from their empirical investigations. The focus has tended to remain at the level of critique rather than evolving into strategies of practice. The question is whether such principles actually work for children, and whether it is at all possible for schools to put them into practice (Clark et al., 1998, p. 163).

The methodology of ReHaRe seeks to break with the dominant focus on theory in inclusive educational research. The project focuses instead on an empirical investigation of inclusion in practice. In a review on research on inclusive education, Messiou (2016) concluded that much of the international research has focused on teachers’ attitudes, rather than on school practices (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2010; De Boer et al., 2011). In ReHaRe, our focus is on practice, on inclusion in action. Aligned with Farrell (2000), we focus on ‘the more important empirical questions related to the development of inclusive education’ (Farrell 2000: 160). Our goal is to examine how and if the rhetoric of inclusive education is matched by reality. As Ferguson describes, the research challenge: ‘[w]hat happens in those classrooms is equally critical to achieving genuine inclusive education’ (Ferguson, 2008, p. 113). ReHaRe contributes to research on inclusive education by focusing on practice development based on close collaboration between pupils and teachers as partners.

The field of research: inclusive education and pupils’ perspectives

The research approach taken here is situated within a body of research in the field of inclusive education on children’s perspectives and voices. Student engagement is viewed as a crucial aspect in this research (Appleton, Christenson and Furlong 2008). The research is premised on an assumption of a connection between pupils’ engagement, achievement and school behaviour. At every level of social and economic advantage and disadvantage, engaged pupils tend to perform better and to drop out at lower rates. The ReHaRe project enables the schoolchildren to participate in planning, analysing and developing the practice of teaching. Our assumption is that this kind of participation will enhance their engagement, leading to improved achievement and better school behaviour overall. In an interview study of seven-year-old children who had transferred from a special school to a general school, Jacklin (2015) found that processes of transfer were linked with and through the social processes of the schools concerned, thus highlighting the importance of considering children’s prior experiences of schools and schooling. Norwich and Kelly (2003) studied children’s views on inclusion and concluded that taking account of children’s perspectives can inform policy and practice. Tetler and Baltzer (2011) carried out research on the climate of inclusive classrooms seen from the children’s perspective. Based on 14 interviews, their research found that involving children in the planning and evaluation of teaching supported their autonomy and engagement. Tangen also used interviews to study the quality of school life from children’s perspectives (Tangen, 2015), concluding that ‘the experiences and perspectives of pupils, especially of those pupils whose voices are seldom heard, can make a powerful contribution in developing a better understanding of how equality, inclusion and quality of school life can be achieved.’ Adderley et al. (2015) carried out similar research on children’s perspectives as to how the practices of teachers help or hinder children’s sense of inclusion in classrooms. Based on group interviews with children, they highlighted the importance of children’s interpersonal relationships with teachers and with each other. These relationships are seen as crucial for understanding the process of inclusion in schools and for the further development of practice. Levin (2000) argues that education reforms cannot succeed without the involvement of children. Mack (2012) carried out action research to support equal classroom participation with a focus on teaching practices and oral participation in classrooms. This research shows that an equal classroom discursive teaching practice will help prevent the exclusion of children. Robinson and Taylor (2007) theorize the role of student voice,
advocating further debate on ethics and values. In the context of these studies, the ReHaRe project contributes to a well-established field of research that seeks to involve pupils in the planning, evaluation and development of the practice of teaching.

**The methodology of ReHaRe**

Compared with the body of research described above, which uses children as interview subjects, the methodology used in ReHaRe includes children as research partners. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: ‘Every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously’ (Article 12, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Aligned with this, the intention of the ReHaRe project is to establish collaboration between pupils and their teachers in order to take into account the children’s views. With a view to achieving this goal, child researchers carry out research together with teachers and university researchers and have an influence on what is actually happening when the teacher is teaching. The overall methodological approach in ReHaRe is action research, an approach which has also been called ‘inclusive inquiry’. Inclusive inquiry draws on the ‘organisational paradigm’ (Clark et al., 1995) and focuses on ‘factors in the context in which learning is intended to occur’ (Messiou et al., 2016, p. 47). The aim is to focus on features within schools that facilitate responses to diversity or pose barriers to participation for some pupils. Furthermore, the methodology aims to produce evidence that could create a space for rethinking by interrupting the existing discourses of teachers. Inclusive inquiry is also based on ‘evidence collected from students about teaching arrangements’ (Messiou et al., 2016, p. 47). The views of children, expressed in dialogues with teachers and researchers, are seen as a powerful factor in challenging the conventional teaching discourse. Finally, the methodology draws on an ‘adapted lesson study approach’, which is a systematic procedure for the development of teaching (Hiebert et al., 2002; Lewis et al., 2006). The core research activity of inclusive inquiry involves dialogues with the pupils. The dialogues between children and teachers (and researchers) concern relations between learning and teaching, the development of inclusion and learning about differences.

The ReHaRe project consists of two main phases. In the first phase (October 2017–January 2018), universities and school partners (the so-called hub schools) collaborated on developing the inclusive inquiry approach. Between January 2018 and June 2018, pupils and a trio of teachers at one hub school (in the five countries) worked with the inclusive inquiry approach in a pilot phase. In the second phase, using the results of the pilot phase, the methods and approaches were refined so they could be used in the second phase of the action research, conducted in five additional schools in each country (September 2018 – June 2019).

**Inclusive inquiry: the study approach**

In the second phase, 30 schools worked with the process of inclusive inquiry and deployed a ‘level of use framework’ in order to ensure that all partners could follow the process. The level of use framework has enabled trios of teachers to determine the extent to which they have implemented the approach. In this way, members of a trio can identify areas that need further attention, as the framework includes a set of thirteen indicators that articulate the essential features of inclusive inquiry.

The core of inclusive inquiry is collaboration between teachers and their pupils with regard to planning, analysing and developing the practice of teaching in order to support all children’s presence, participation and achievement. The overall phases in the inclusive inquiry process are as follows. First, teachers talk and collaborate with the child researchers about their role. Second, the child researchers gather their classmates’ views about learning and teaching. And finally, teachers and child researchers plan a lesson collaboratively, to be taught in each of the three classes taking part. During this lesson – the so-called research lesson – three children observe the lesson together with the researcher and teachers. In order to fulfil the inclusive inquiry criteria, the child researchers should be representative of the diversity in school, including children who are considered hard to reach. At the end of each lesson, the children, teachers and researchers meet in order to analyse and reflect on the lesson that has been taught. In this dialogue, the children’s views on teaching are included in the evaluation, planning and refining of the subsequent lesson. The process was repeated three times. Other research methods were also piloted during this phase. The researchers’ written accounts of practice describe the details of the work done in the schools. These accounts of practice, in the form of interviews, recordings of dialogues and observations, form the empirical data for the analysis of inclusive inquiry in Danish schools presented in this paper.

**Inclusive inquiry: children as co-researchers**

The aim of inclusive inquiry is to strengthen existing practices by identifying ways to include all children in lessons, and particularly those who are seen as hard to reach. The aim is to determine whether and how these students can be engaged in learning activities.
Hence, inclusive inquiry strategies try to develop lessons in order to make them more inclusive. The action research process involved consists of three phases: Plan, Teach and Analyse, as described in the following.

The planning phase: A trio of teachers decide to collaborate on developing their practices, including the joint planning of a research lesson and mutual observations of specific lessons. The role of the child researchers varied a little in the different national contexts and even between schools in the same national context. In one country, individual interviews were carried out and analysed by the teachers and child researchers together. Based on this analysis, main areas for change were identified and developed. In another country, the teachers asked all the children what had helped them to learn. In other words, all the children were involved in discussing what ‘good teaching’ and ‘teaching for all’ mean, after which the child researchers were selected. Another country selected nine child researchers and trained them, after which they collected viewpoints from their classmates during a half-hour session. The collected ideas were then discussed, some were selected for further discussion, and the children then voted for their preferences.

The teaching phase: Based on the children’s views, the teachers and child researchers prepared a lesson plan. The intention of this lesson plan was to engage all the children in learning activities. The data analysed in this paper consists primarily of dialogues in the process of planning and analysing the lesson. However, observations were also included from what we call ‘research lessons’, with the teachers, child researchers and university researchers observing the teacher in the teaching activity. The observation grid led to a focus on the key research question: How are the students encouraged to participate and learn in the lesson? What factors seem to prevent some students from participating and learning in this lesson?

The analysis phase: After the lesson, and drawing on observation notes and the views of the pupils, the lesson was evaluated at a meeting involving the trio of teachers and the child researchers who had observed the lesson. The aim of this meeting was to consider ideas that might help in refining or improving the next lesson plan to be presented. After three rounds of this process, the teachers and child researchers discussed which factors tended to make the lessons more inclusive. In this discussion, the teachers underlined that different views should be taken into consideration before reaching any final conclusion as how to design the subsequent research lesson.

Inclusive inquiry in the Danish context

In the following, we describe how inclusive inquiries can expand the space available for children who are viewed as hard to reach. We then describe the more problematic aspects of action research involving children as equal partners in improving the educational practice of schools.

As part of the Danish section of our project, five of the six schools taking part were located in the same area in Denmark. All six schools serve a diversity of children and are located in areas in which the families are of relatively low socio-economic status. All six are state schools, none are special schools, and none of them have special-education classes. Three of the schools have a high percentage of children from ethnic minority families. All the trios of teachers collaborated with a diverse range of children: some of these children could be categorized as high flyers, some were regarded as average, and others were regarded as hard to reach. The teachers saw the selection of child researchers as an opportunity to increase their engagement in lessons and in the school more generally. The children taking part were between the ages of 9 and 11, and the teachers were all experienced.

The Danish teachers established collaboration between child researchers and the whole class in the process of gathering the pupils’ views about inclusive education, defined as a teaching practice in which every child participates and learns. Instead of giving responsibility to a few children for gathering their classmates’ views, the children collaborated with the teachers and arranged various collective (at classroom level) processes during which they reflected on and discussed good teaching. The democratic tradition in Denmark means that there is a certain amount of reluctance to select certain children instead of others. As a result, the process of gathering children’s views was collective, and various methods were used in order to collect ideas and reflections (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2016; Messiou et al., 2016; Ulvseth et al., 2017), and in order to represent a range of different voices in a collective setting.

The child researchers were told to observe all their classmates and keep their eyes and ears open. Their task was to collect and analyse statements from their peers about good teaching in collaboration with their teachers. This process resulted in the following foci for lesson development:

1) Working in pairs and physical activities. 2) Working with a computer instead of being seated in a chair all the time. 3) Variations in form, method and material, with assignments that are neither too difficult nor too easy, with teachers who are present as well as being active and giving feedback, and peers who work quietly in their own places, using feedback from peers. 4) Physical activities, variations in form, method and material, and immersion among peers. 5) Computer and drawing. 6) Variation in form, method and material and the opportunity to
choose form, method and material. These foci were incorporated by the child researchers and teachers into the planning of the teaching. During the lesson, the children could choose between playing games, drawing, working in their notebooks and doing exercises as part of the task. All the children participated and learned.

**First analysis: expanding participation through teacher-pupil collaboration**

The overall finding of the inclusive inquiries in the six Danish schools was that teachers have grown more aware of the potential of engaging in dialogue with their pupils, and that this awareness has expanded to include a wider range of children. The Danish teachers underscored the benefits and opportunities created when they have a dialogue about the planning and teaching with the pupils. Furthermore, they experience that the children’s points of view can develop their teaching in a positive way. As one teacher puts it: ‘I have learned something that I would never have thought about myself. It creates a perspective that we can’t produce in teacher dialogues.’ In addition, the Danish teachers emphasized the power of observing their colleagues’ teaching, underlining the importance of the dialogues with colleagues after mutual planning and observation.

Data from the inclusive inquiries conducted in the six Danish schools indicates that collaborating with children about the practice of teaching can expand and support pupils’ participation and achievement by having more children as well as the teachers discover the diversity of children in new ways. In previous research (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2016, 2018), we found that Danish teachers were preoccupied with subject teaching and whole class teaching. They endeavoured to reach out to most of the children but not all of the children. Differentiated and inclusive teaching was simply not a part of their teaching practice. During inclusive inquiries, the teachers’ professional perspective changed. They discovered the diversity of children, and they obtained new perspectives on some of them. Our findings show that inclusive inquiries have a great impact on the groups of children who have participated as child researchers, and that this is related to the changed perspectives among the teachers. Here is an empirical example from the hub school:

**Inclusive inquiry at the hub school: expanding participation**

In this example using one of the Danish cases, we show how inclusive inquiry and action research/school development can enhance the participation of marginalized children, thus contributing to the development of more inclusive learning environments. The hub school is a comprehensive school covering both primary and secondary education, with 690 pupils in two sections. The school is situated in a municipality near Copenhagen. The school serves a diverse group of pupils and is committed to the inclusive agenda. The learning outcomes and well-being of the pupils are average or above average for the socio-economic composition in question.

In order to ensure that the children participating as child researchers were sufficiently diverse, the teachers included some children who could be categorized as high flyers as well as children who were regarded as hard to reach. The teachers believed that selecting children who were hard to reach might increase their engagement in lessons and in school more widely. The role of these children in the first part of the inclusive inquiry involved participation in various activities arranged by teachers with the purpose of gathering views from all the children in three classes. In defining their role as researchers, the children were instructed to keep their eyes and ears open. They were supposed to participate – with their classmates – in the process of gathering views from all the children as well as listening carefully to what their peers said. After gathering their classmates’ views from children in the three classes, the teachers and child researchers analysed what they had heard. From this outset, they planned a research lesson. Furthermore, the children were told how to find their role as observers in the research lessons and how to act as reflective partners in analysing the lessons.

Working with the knowledge gained from this process, two focal points were identified as being essential to good teaching: working in pairs, and ensuring that there was some kind of physical activity during lessons. The teachers and the child researchers conducted an open dialogue about the opportunities and drawbacks of allowing the children to decide who their partner should be during the collaborative classroom work. The children explained that it was difficult to concentrate when their working partner was their best friend. The children and teachers also discussed the importance for children of having breaks and including some kind of physical activity in the teaching. Here is a description of the lesson that resulted:

The lesson covered the subject Danish. In the classroom are 28 pupils and 1 teacher. The theme of this lesson is verbs. The lesson consists of five activities: 1) a talk about verbs, 2) a story read out loud by the teacher, with the children performing the verbs in the story (as a way of including physical activities), 3) the children write a story with verbs in pairs, 4) the children read their story out loud for the others in groups of four, and 5) some children read their story to the whole class.

In the following dialogue, the children focused on working with partners and once again discussed how to decide on how to choose partners.
Child: ‘I remember the bands. Musical instrument partners. We chose partners as instruments, and we were four children working together. And we have tried to work in pairs. That also worked well.’

Teacher: ‘Yes. We have tried that. I remember. Each child has an instrument and creates a band with children having/playing other instruments.’

Child: ‘Yes, that was fun. And we met other partners, and the working groups were mixed.’

Teacher: ‘What I think you are saying is that the children, in the process of planning and discussing good teaching, pointed out the benefits of choosing partners themselves. And this was not the case in this lesson.’

Child: ‘Yes. It’s not always the same. If you’re working with your friend, you’re just having fun.’

The next focus in the dialogue was on physical activities. The children were very interested in this topic. They agreed that having new partners had been a success, and some stressed that it was important to get to know more peers well. However, the children did not use the words ‘learning community’ or ‘children’s communities’. Instead, the children’s reflections underlined the relation between their well-being in child communities and the learning environment, and how the two things affect each other. In one of the reflections, a child who is seen as hard to reach suggests (during class) that the break that takes place before undertaking the group work of writing a story could be arranged so that the new partners could start to formulate their ideas during the break and get to know each other better. This child makes a very interesting suggestion about connecting the break with the learning activities as part of a social activity. According to the teachers, this boy did not normally participate much in class.

This is a clear example of a child who benefits from being a child researcher and who shows that he is interested in participating, that his participation depends on the working climate and on the lesson planning. It shows how powerful inclusive inquiry can be, and how teacher-pupil collaboration can give teachers new tools for working with the use of inclusion in their teaching. However, the effect of the dialogues between children and teachers (during the research process) varied to some extent. In some dialogues, the children’s views led to genuine changes in the practice of teaching. In other dialogues, however, the children’s views were ignored and/or disregarded. The degree to which the teachers took the dialogue task seriously reflects the local professional cultures, the teachers’ values (Barth Barth, 1994), and the way in which the teachers perceive their situation and opportunities.

Second analysis: the influence of local cultures and politics on inclusive education

As mentioned above, this paper is divided into two main sections. The section above is about the overall aims, methodologies and findings of ReHaRe project. In the following section, we analyse the more problematic aspects of doing action research with inclusive inquiry involving dialogues between children and teachers. These problems relate to school culture and the relationship between teachers and pupils. The relationship between teachers and pupils is not necessarily equal, and ethical issues may arise in action research/inclusive inquiry when the school culture is hierarchical and not particularly democratic. In addition, national policies relating to schools do not tend to support the idea of giving influence to children. Education policy in Denmark, as elsewhere, emphasizes a focus on learning outcomes. Democratic dialogues and enhancing children’s influence on teaching are not prioritized as highly as performance and learning outcomes. This kind of priority, together with the traditional hierarchy between teacher and pupils, can form a barrier to the development of teacher-pupil collaboration which is implicit in the action research described here. One finding of our study is that education policy, including policy on inclusive education, must take into consideration the fact that professional development requires a change in the values and local professional cultures of schools. Education policy and action research must include consideration of these values, which are often deeply rooted.

The Scandinavian welfare state and school policy

The international partners in the Erasmus+ project were very interested in what they perceive as Denmark’s highly democratic school culture. The idea of children’s democratic education was written into the Danish School Act (Folkeskoleloven) in 1975, an Act which emphasized the making of democratic citizens as a key element. During and after a school visit to the Danish hub school, the research partners from Austria, Spain, Portugal and the UK were impressed by several features of Danish school practice: the informal tone between children and teachers; the pupils’ freedom and autonomy (with opportunities to choose their own learning activities); the high level of trust that teachers showed in their pupils, who carried out their own self-directed learning; the fact that children displayed great acceptance of each other (in very diverse groups); the way children moved around the classroom and other parts of the school (e.g., the library) while doing their schoolwork, instead of sitting on their chairs listening to the teacher; the many activities that appeared to boost
children’s creativity; the way differentiated teaching was integrated into the school culture and offered numerous opportunities for learning; and the fact that students had the same teacher for the entire school year. In sum, our foreign partners emphasized the high level of democracy in the Danish hub school. This school has a high degree of diversity, with a long history of working with inclusion; and it also performs well in the PISA tests, despite the relatively low socio-economic status of the children. So the school is in some ways exemplary and not representative of the average school in Denmark.

The debate over inclusive education touches upon the very core of how the Scandinavian democratic welfare state perceives itself. Compared with the other countries participating in the ReHaRe project, Denmark has a history and policy aimed at fostering a democratic welfare state. Since the interwar period, the Nordic welfare states have developed universalistic principles and ideals for including the whole of society, such as wide-ranging social rights and benefits for all individuals regardless of income or social status (Ensig and Johnstone 2015). In a Danish school context, the principles of inclusion were therefore not groundbreaking in relation to the existing ideas, culture and practice. The inclusion discourse was introduced into a Danish school environment that was already receptive to such ideas (Hamre, 2018). What the foreign education experts observed in a highly inclusive school culture was a typical situation for the Danish researchers – although it is true that the hub school in question is above average in a Danish context.

We will now consider the other Danish schools taking part with a view to challenging the assumption that Danish school cultures are democratic. They can be democratic, but a prerequisite for this is that schools maintain a professional focus on equality, inclusiveness and democracy. In an analysis of the dialogues (during the inquiry phase) that draws on critical ethnography, we shed light on the problematic aspects of action research. We suggest that the underlying cultural ideas of the teacher/pupil relation have affected the dialogues, and that this generates ethical problems. The recurring question is: ‘How can equal dialogues that are supposed to be promoted by action research dissolve the existing structures of power when dialogues take place in settings – in this case the school – that is based on hierarchy and differences?’

**From democracy to accountability**

Danish school policy, once based on social uplift and equal opportunity, has gradually evolved under the influence of international neoliberal ideas about accountability, measurable output and performance. Since the 1950 s, social-democratic governments have pursued the goal that schools should challenge social inequality. Along with other countries, Denmark ratified the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in 1994. This ratification reflected the universalistic principle of the Danish school system. Until the beginning of the 2000 s, inclusion and inclusive education in Denmark entailed the inclusion of social rights aligned with values inherent in the Nordic welfare states. However, this inclusion of social rights has been challenged by the notion of accountability in relation to the变异学术的 academic performance. Inclusive education is now seen as a levelling mechanism pertaining to both the academic level in the classroom and the school as a whole (Engsig & Johnstone 2015). This change in the image of inclusion is associated with a general neoliberal change in Danish school policy (Moos, 2014) towards a focus on measured achievement, standards, tests and learning outcomes (Holloway & Hamre, 2018). To summarize, education policy in Denmark emphasizes both inclusion and learning achievement. In a Danish context, inclusion, differentiated teaching and learning achievement are understood as coherent entities. The political aim of providing equal opportunities for all children was strengthened in the legislation in 2010, 2012 and 2014, leading to an increased diversity of children in local schools. At the same time, in the 2015 reform, inclusion was also linked to academic performance. However, the politicians have paid very little attention to questions relating to the way in which inclusion should be implemented. They have been more preoccupied with increased learning outcomes, with published comparisons of pupil test results in Danish schools, and with discussions of how Danish pupils performed in PISA tests compared with pupils in other countries. These neoliberal policies form a context for teachers’ practice, the effect of which is to reduce (if not eliminate) the influence of children on teaching.

**Local school cultures: power and politics**

Aligned with the research aim of understanding educational practice, the Danish research in six schools has focused on the underlying assumptions behind the teacher/pupil relation and has gained insight into how these underlying understandings affect teacher/pupil collaboration and dialogues. Based on the empirical material and findings from the research, we examine the potentials and limitations related to the idea of children acting as equal partners in the construction of school education.

We have found it necessary to study not only policies and assumptions, but also everyday practice.
What actually happens when we facilitate this new form of cooperation between children and teachers? By observing the six schools and participating in dialogues between teachers and pupils, we found that when the teaching turns out differently from planned (in the negative sense), the children’s position becomes more marginalized. We regard this untoward marginalization as a result of the school culture and the historical relation between children and teachers. In the following, we will investigate the importance of local school culture. Local school culture, we argue, is crucial in terms of whether (and how) schools can live up to their stated commitment to incorporate children’s participation in the planning of teaching.

The analytical focus for the analysis of six school cultures in Denmark participating in inclusive inquiries is informed by Bourdieu’s practice theory (Bourdieu, 1993) and Barth’s processual anthropology (2004). The relation between the external (societal and cultural structures) and the internal (practices) informs an analytical perspective that has enabled us to understand teachers as being related to policy, society and culture. Bourdieu’s main point is that individual practices are collectively orchestrated, but that they are not a product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ refers to a strategy-generating principle that enables agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations, while at the same time relating to objective structures (Bourdieu 1993: 73). Bourdieu stresses the power relations and hierarchies embedded in institutional practices. He thus highlights ‘the unequal social-class distribution of linguistic and cultural capital’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This theory challenges the assumption that communication in institutional settings can be free of hierarchy and power. He emphasizes the invisible constraints that both limit and constitute pedagogic action related to an implicit culture.

We are led to ask, what are the institutional means and social conditions which enable the pedagogic relation to perpetuate itself, in the happy unconsciousness of those engaged in it, even when it so utterly fails to achieve its apparently most specific end – in short, to seek to determine that which sociologically defines a relation of pedagogic communication, as opposed to a relation of communication defined in formal terms (Bourdieu 1977: 108).

From this approach, it follows that dialogues between teachers and children can never be free of the power dimension. As Bourdieu puts it: “To reduce the pedagogic relation to a purely communicative relation would make it impossible to account for the specific characteristics it owes to the authority of the pedagogic institution” (Bourdieu 1977: 108).

Bourdieu’s theory is a theory of social practice in general and not of professional practice in institutions subjected to political and theoretical objectives. In Barth’s perspective, actions are embedded in ‘the social’, and people (teachers) make decisions and act (in situations) on the basis of values, understandings and the opportunities they can see in the given moment and situation (Barth 2004: 14). Circumstances and the way they are perceived by actors (in our case, teachers and pupils) are present and embedded in interactions between people (for instance, social encounters between pupils and teachers). So according to Barth, people’s way of defining situations is central to how they act in a given situation (Goffman, 2010). Hence, the way teachers define a situation – according to their professional values and understandings – influences social encounters, including their encounters with pupils in a presumably equal dialogue situation. The approaches of Bourdieu and Barth inform our analytical focus on teachers’ values, understandings and opportunities that will be unfolded in dialogues between teachers and children when they plan, evaluate and develop lessons.

**Having an equal dialogue or not – differences between local school cultures**

One significant finding from our Danish school contexts is that there were major differences between the six schools involved in terms of the values and understandings of the teachers. As mentioned above, five of the schools were located in the same geographical area of Denmark; but they were all subject to the same national education policy. They also taught similar child populations consisting of a good proportion of children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Despite these similarities, we found major differences in the way the dialogues between children and teachers evolved. In some of the schools, values such as democracy, equality and pupil influence were more prominent; while in others these values were pushed into the background by the local professional culture. We illustrate this contrast using two examples of dialogues. We call the two dialogues ‘closed’ and ‘open’ respectively:

**Teacher:** Sometimes we take a break without schoolwork, and sometimes a break with schoolwork. Before going back to the classroom, the children have a break for themselves.

**Child 1:** That sounds fine.

**Child 2:** What do you think about that?

**Child 1:** I think it should be OK to watch YouTube during the break.
Teacher: Why is it important to have a break?

Child 1: Fresh air for the brain.

Child 3: Could we watch YouTube outside, then?

Child 4: You can watch YouTube at home.

Teacher: I am thinking, the next lesson will be similar to today’s lesson. Two assignments and then a break — and here we can make the combination of a break with schoolwork, followed by a break without schoolwork. What do you say to that?

Child 1: OK. Then you get what you want, and we get what we want.

This is a snapshot of a dialogue in which children express their views. However, the teacher ends up not accepting the ideas for change suggested by the children. The children tried several times to suggest that a break should be a break, but the teacher is committed to another idea of breaks during the lesson. The children give up or become resigned. They end up accepting the teachers’ conclusion. In the last sentence, the child demonstrates that the encounter was a discussion (who gets the last word) and not a democratic dialogue in which teachers listen to the children in order to change practice. As a result, the very idea of inclusive inquiry dissolves because the teacher controls the collaboration. We find that the marginalization of the pupils’ views reflects a school culture that promotes a classical understanding of positions and opportunities in school. Even when trying something new, the teacher/child hierarchy is maintained as the culture. The way in which teachers define the situation (Goffman, 2010) on the basis of values and understandings (Barth, 2004) influences the communication that takes place.

Let us now take a contrasting example in which the teacher performs an inclusive inquiry in order to understand children’s perspectives and to learn from the process. By contrast with the first example, in this example the teacher is willing to change his practice and understanding of practice. Here is a snippet of the dialogue about studying animals:

Child 1: Maybe some of us will finish the assignment early. It gets boring. Maybe we could get another assignment. However, this shouldn’t be a reward. If it is, we won’t do a good job. We would choose an animal that we know all about.

Teacher: What could be done about that?

Child 1: Maybe we could have more assignments to choose from. For instance, when you finish the assignment, you have to draw an animal.

Teacher: So, would it be nice to alternate between exploring, drawing, writing and sharing knowledge?

Child 1: Yes.

Child 2: This would be like another lesson. We worked in pairs, and then we would have to draw animals, look for information and do lots of fun stuff.

Child 1: If you had arranged/planned the lesson differently, nobody would have been noisy and distracted.

Teacher: How should the lesson be changed and improved? What would you suggest?

In this dialogue, the teacher is curious and wants to learn from the children, willing to redefine and renew the teaching as part of the collaboration. The dialogue becomes an equal exchange of ideas supporting equal positions in a setting in which the power relations are less dominant. This kind of equal interaction reflects a local professional culture in which evaluation, dialogues and children’s democratic influence are values occupying a central position. This particular school is known for working hard to create an inclusive culture and inclusive learning environments. In pursuing this goal, the children participate as equal partners. In this setting the values and understanding inherent in the action research – inclusive inquiry – are aligned with the values and understanding at the school. In this case, we find that the local school culture affects the collaboration between children and teachers, enabling it to expand the space allowed for children’s participation.

**Discussion: action research, school development and local cultures**

The dialogues above reveal profound differences in the way teachers and pupils communicate with each other. Some dialogues were ‘closed’, in the sense that there was no dialogue about how the participants understood specific processes and concepts. Other dialogues, as shown in the second example, were more ‘open’, in that both teachers and children were curious about each other’s understandings and challenged these understandings. For instance, by asking: ‘How do you understand?’ Or: ‘What could I change?’ Open dialogues empowered children by giving them a degree of influence on how the teaching should develop. The closed dialogues offered children a choice, but it was a choice limited to the teacher’s suggestions, thereby reproducing the hierarchical structures in school.

These schools all operate under the same Danish national policy. However, the dialogues between children and teachers, and hence their diverse school cultures, showed variations in the way democracy is practised in Danish schools. Some dialogues were simply more democratic than others; some dialogues were open and inclusive; others were more closed and marginalizing. Some gave children a choice; others
gave children the illusion of choice. The hidden role of hierarchy, which can also be referred to as the power dimension, is a problematic aspect in action research because the goal of such research is that children should collaborate as equal partners with their teachers. As researchers, we cannot be sure that this ambition can actually be achieved. This is because regardless of good intentions, the dialogue is itself affected by the nature of the school’s professional culture. Hence, the closed dialogue described above took place within a school with a local professional culture in which children are not considered equal partners. The teaching practice in this school is highly teacher directed, and the school operates with a restricted understanding of how learning takes place; an understanding which involves strict rules about behaviour related to teaching. This culture tends to inhibit the use of inclusive inquiry. It restricts the role of pupils as equal players, and creates an ethical dilemma for the researchers. This ethical dilemma is that we allow the children to believe that they will have an influence, but their efforts end up being thwarted by the teachers’ insistence on maintaining the conventional hierarchy. Instead of actually empowering the children, which could potentially lead to change in the teaching, there is only the pretense that the children will be listened to. The result is business as usual and disillusioned pupils. This finding is in line with similar research (Messiou & Hope 2014) in which teacher-child collaboration does not always reveal genuine engagement with the views of the pupils. Wennergren and Blossing (2015) emphasize the importance of mutual engagement and joint enterprise in learning communities of children and teachers.

Bourdieu’s theory of power and hierarchy in the pedagogic relation emphasizes that power is part of a communicative encounter. As Bourdieu puts it, communication is not purely communication. The authority of teachers and the school as an institution can influence the dialogue by inviting the children to enter into a democratic dialogue without actually listening to them. There is a verbal interaction, but hardly any sort of dialogue in the broad sense of listening to alternative views and altering one’s own views. The potential disempowerment of children poses an ethical problem for action research. In school settings characterized by cultures and power relations that do not support democracy and equality, children are caught between researchers who promote democratic dialogues, and teachers who only give lip service to dialogue but who in fact maintain their power positions over pupils. Furthermore, teachers in Denmark are subject to a school policy regime which emphasizes learning outcomes and subject teaching. In our previous research (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2016, 2018), we found that this kind of policy draws teachers’ attention away from the inclusion agenda, which is an agenda focusing on diversity (inclusion as a social right), pushing them towards an agenda focusing on learning outcomes (inclusion which is subject to accountability). For some of the schools taking part, this accountability agenda has transformed their local professional cultures to the extent that school development and inclusive inquiry are viewed as alien forces.

The lesson learned from this study is that putting children at the centre of inquiries about teaching has the potential to change the practice of teaching. It can indeed provide new opportunities for children, including children who are regarded as being hard to reach. However, success in involving children depends on the kind of local professional culture in which the school concerned operates. Action research, professional development and policy implementation cannot act to change values if the local professional culture is resistant; and as long as the relation between teachers and pupils remains hierarchical and undemocratic, action research and political initiatives focusing on inclusion will not succeed.

Notes

1. Austria: VS Bertha von Suttner, VS Gabelsberger, VS Kalsdorf, VS Leopoldinum, VS Schönau, VS Viktor Kaplan
   Denmark: Flakkebjerg Skole, Kokkedal Skole, Vallerød Skole, Humlebæk Skole, Høsterkøb Skole.
   England: Shirley Infants, Shirley Junior, Hollybrook Infants, Hollybrook Junior, Beechwood Primary School.
   Spain: Ceip Aldebaran, Ceip Antonio Osuna, Ceip Federico García Lorca, CEIP CIUDAD DE NEJAPA, CEIP LAS ACACIAS, CEIP CARLOS SAINZ DE LOS TERREROS. Portugal: Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico N.º 5 de Faro, Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico da Conceição, Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico de Esteoi, Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico da Bordeira, Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico de Santa Bárbara de Nexe, Escola do 1ºCiclo do Ensino Básico da Lejana.

2. Details of the project described in this paper, including the materials used, can be found in various languages at: https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/

3. https://rehare533167368.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/re_hare_draft-inclusive-inquiry-guide_-_english.pdf.

4. A teacher’s questionnaire, a children’s questionnaire and observation templates. In addition, several pupil voice activities were developed in each school.

5. These are the questions: Do you ask for help when you have difficulties? Who do you ask? If you were the teacher in your class, what would you do to help your students learn? State three things that come to mind when you think of your class. What do you like most about your class? What do you dislike about your class? Is there anything that you would change in the way your teachers teach? Is there anything that you would change in the dynamics of the class with your classmates? Do you get bored in class? If so, why? Do you understand the things that are explained in class?

6. http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF.
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