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Student participation in dialogue in individual subject curriculum meetings: students' and parents' perceptions

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ABSTRACT

While there has been considerable research on students with special educational needs and their parents' participation at individual subject curriculum (ISC) meetings at school, less attention has been paid to their perception of the dialogue between students and professionals. The aim of this study has been to investigate whether the dialogue taking place in ISC meetings is deliberative. The data for this study are based on individual, semi-structured interviews with 12 Norwegian lower secondary school students with specific learning difficulties, and 10 parents. Findings show that the professionals' use of technical jargon made it challenging for students to share their views in the dialogue, as they did not understand everything being said. Moreover, findings show that professionals only exceptionally asked to know the students' views. The study shows that the levels of student agency is poor and needs to be addressed.

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dialogue

Introduction

In Norway, inclusion constitutes a basic principle underpinning the Government's education policy (Ministry of Education and Research 2016–2017). The overarching principle is that students must be given equal opportunities to progress in their work with the academic subjects, irrespectively of gender, social, cultural or linguistic background (Dale 2008, 82). An important aspect of inclusion in schools is that all students, including those receiving special education, should participate in the planning, implementation, and assessment of the teaching they receive (Ministry of Education and Research 2006). In ten-year compulsory education almost 49,000 students receive special education, which corresponds to 7.7% of student population (Ministry of Education and Research 2019a). Students who have been unable, or are unable, to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes from regular teaching, have the right to receive special education (Education Act, Section 5-1). The concept of students with special educational needs (SEN) is increasingly used to describe children who vary in their ability to read, write, and calculate (Ogden 2014). In recent years one has seen a

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steady increase in the proportion of students receiving special education in ordinary classes (Ministry of Education and Research 2019b).

Students with a right of special education also have a right to get an individual subject curriculum (ISC) (Education Act, Section 5-5). An ISC is an important part of planning the teaching for students receiving special education as it outlines the goals and content and how the teaching will be implemented. Accordingly, it is important to include each student in the dialogue that can lead to decisions about his or her ISC. One platform where this dialogue takes place is ISC meetings, where professionals, the student's parents, and the student meet to discuss aspects of the ISC not yet having been decided upon. The term 'professionals' refers to employees at the school with education and/or special education qualifications who participate in ISC meetings (e.g. teachers and special educators).

Research on attendance in ISC meetings shows that students in the 15–19 age bracket attend meetings as frequently as their parents (Wagner et al. 2012), and that principals, special education directors, and special educators encourage students to take an active part in meetings (Martin et al. 2004). However, research shows that students and parents have a passive role in the meetings (Bray and Russell 2016), and they describe their participation as frustrating and stressful because their own perspectives are dismissed (Zeitlin and Curcic 2014). A report published by the Ombudsman for Children (2017), indicates that students with SEN only rarely take part in decisions on how the special education is to be carried out. It is important to obtain knowledge on whether students and parents feel that professionals include students in the dialogue at ISC meetings, because research has shown that students who are included are more motivated for achieving their learning goals (Barnard-Brak and Lechtenberger 2010).

The aim of this study has been to obtain knowledge on whether the dialogue that takes place in ISC meetings between students, their parents, and professionals is deliberative. The focus on deliberation is anchored in the fact that the curriculum in Norwegian schools aims at promoting democracy (Education Act, Section 1-1) by giving students values, attitudes and skills that contribute to their becoming active citizens in society (Stray 2011). By taking part in deliberation through dialogue, students learn to distance themselves from the passive adoption of correct opinions and behaviour (Solhaug 2006). The article continues with a brief presentation of the study's theoretical framework, which is based on Habermas (1996) definition of processes of deliberation.

Theoretical framework

Habermas (1996, 305) 'processes of deliberation' are characterised by each individual participant having an equal right and opportunity to be heard, to introduce topics, to make their own proposals, and to criticise proposals made by others. Habermas (1996) understanding is not based on dialogue between professionals (in this case, school employees with education and/or special education qualifications), and non-professionals (in this case, students and their parents), but rather a 'deliberative democracy', characterised by reaching decisions through a political consensus after citizens have expressed their own viewpoints, arguments and opinions (Englund 2010). However, this has not proved to be an obstacle to the theory's earlier application in the study of professional conversations

(cf. Tveit 2014; Tveit and Walseth 2012). The conversations that arise in ISC meetings where both professionals and non-professionals (in this case, students and their parents) are present, exemplify a professional conversation. This theory was preferred because it creates an understanding of the experiences of students and their parents relating to the dialogue that arose in the ISC meetings.

Methodology

The present study is based on an interview study consisting of 12 interviews with students with SEN and 10 interviews with their parents. Each interview was conducted separately. The interviews were semi-structured, with data in the present study being based on open-ended questions about how informants perceived the dialogue that took place at the ISC meetings. The empirical data referred to in this article are based on audiotaped and transcribed material. The study was reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data on 26 April 2017 and was carried out in accordance with the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees' (NESH 2016) guidelines for handling personal data.

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Patton 2002) was used to select information-rich cases to illuminate the phenomenon in question: the views of students and their parents on the conversations taking place in ISC meetings. The sampling criteria for each student were as follows: (1) that they were 15 years of age and enrolled in year 10 (2) they identified with a specific learning difficulty, (3) they were receiving special education in primary school (not a 'special school'), (4) they had attended ISC meetings and were following an ISC, and (5) Norwegian was their first language. The participants in the study are residents in three medium-sized municipalities in Norway, and have varied experience of participating in ISC meetings. While some were present at one, and in some cases two meetings, others were present at parts of a meeting.

The sampling criteria for parents were that they had participated in minimum one ISC meeting, and that they had a child who met the above criteria. All students, with the exception of two, had a parent who was an informant in the study. The parents gave their own consent to being included as participants in the study. The educational psychological service was asked to distribute an information sheet to potential participants, in order that they could determine whether they wished to participate, and an age-appropriate information sheet was provided for students, to help them evaluate whether they wished to participate. Families wishing to participate consented through signing a form of consent. To protect participant privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of all findings.

Analytical approach

The first stage of the analysis consisted of a review of interview data, where the researcher generated codes describing the content of statements. Examples of codes include needs, contributions, and desires. The second stage involved constructing thematic categories

where codes relating to the same theme were classified in the same category. The category containing the highest number of codes is dialogue, which for this reason was preferred in the continued analysis. The third stage consisted of selecting a theoretical approach that could elucidate interview data concerning dialogue. Habermas (1996) discussion of communication explained as a ‘processes of deliberation’ was preferred, as it reveals the variety in informants’ descriptions. The fourth stage involved the creation of analytical categories with basis in Habermas’ description. The following categories were established: (1) ‘Participants as equals’, (2) ‘Chances to enter and take part’, (3) ‘No use of coercion’, (4) ‘Opportunity to introduce topics, make contributions, suggest and criticise proposals (abbreviated to ‘opportunities to take initiative and criticise’), (5) ‘Mutual understanding’, (6) ‘Open to changing one’s mind’, and (7) ‘Validity claims’. The fifth stage consisted of collating sequences of text in the data material that fell under each of the seven thematic categories mentioned above, and to select categories that would form the basis of the investigation and subsequent discussion of findings. After identifying the sequences, they were copied into a customised form containing the informants’ fictitious names, the names of categories, statements linked to each category, and the number of statements. Of a total of seven categories, the following three were preferred: ‘Chances to enter and take part’, ‘Participants as equals’, and ‘Opportunities to take initiative and criticise’. These categories were preferred as they contained statements from students and parents of the same home, making it possible to compare their experiences. Moreover, the categories were picked because they illuminate experiences with dialogue, which rarely has been explored in previous studies.

Findings

Students’ chances to enter and take part

The students described their opportunities to speak during the dialogue taking place in the ISC meeting. Maria, a student with reading and writing difficulties, had this to say about her own opportunities to participate:

Even though there was a lot I would have liked to say, I quickly realised that I might as well forget about it. It was almost as though the others were competing to say as much as possible in the least amount of time. It then became really difficult to keep up with what was being said, and even more difficult to get a word in. So I chose to remain quiet and let the teachers do the talking.

This reveals that the student’s assessment of the dialogue had a negative impact on her willingness to participate. Seeing that she perceived that the others were ‘competing to say as much as possible in the least amount of time, it was difficult for her to understand what was being said, which made it “even more difficult to get a word in”’. On the other hand, Jon, a student with reading and writing difficulties, perceived that he had good opportunities to participate:

The teachers were really good at letting me get a word in. They made sure that I got

time to think and enough time to answer questions. Often, they speak so quickly that it's difficult for me to catch everything that's said. But they didn't do that this time. I think they adjusted the way they speak to me, in a way that made it possible for me to talk with them.

In this instance, the student points out that the professionals' adapted their language to his communicative skills by giving him 'enough time to answer questions'.

Another aspect that was highlighted by the students relates to their comprehension of words and phrases used by the professionals. Emma, a student with reading, writing and numeracy difficulties, had the following to say in that regard:

I remember how hard I had to work to understand anything at all during the meeting. It was because my teachers used words that were completely unfamiliar to me, and which they actually didn't explain to me. Looking back, I remember that I didn't say all that much. How could I when I didn't understand what they were talking about?

From this, we see that the student not saying 'all that much' is a consequence of the professionals using terms in their dialogue that were not explained to her.

Moreover, the findings indicate that a prerequisite for student participation was that they were given information about the professionals' expectations concerning their roles in the ISC meeting. Vidar, a student with reading and writing difficulties had the following to say:

It was really difficult to take part in what the others were talking about. I remember sitting there, being afraid of doing anything wrong. If only the teacher had told me what he expected of me, everything would have been so much easier for me. Because I didn't know anything at all, I just sat there waiting for them to talk to me.

The above excerpt reveals that a lack of clarification regarding the professionals' expectations relating to the student's role in the meeting limited his opportunity to participate in it.

The parents emphasised the moderator's attempts to include the student in the dialogue. The term 'moderator' here refers to the professionals chairing the ISC meetings. Esther, Vidar's mother, said the following about the moderator's attempts to include her son in the dialogue:

Vidar's tutor, who also chaired the meeting, really made an effort to get him involved in the conversation. It wasn't like he was bombarding him with questions, but rather that he invited Vidar to share his thoughts with the rest of us. I know that it worked, even though Vidar didn't say all that much.

We see from this excerpt that the moderator's choice not to 'bombard' the student with lots of questions, instead encouraging him to share his thoughts, helped her son to take part in the dialogue, according to his mother.

Students as equal participants in ISC meetings

A regards the students' accounts of their own contribution in the ISC meetings, the frequency by which the professionals addressed them and their parents was highlighted. The findings indicate that the professionals more frequently addressed questions to the students' parents rather than addressing the students. The students' perceptions were divided as to whether this was a problem. William, a student with reading, writing and numeracy difficulties, expressed it as follows:

I mean, I noticed that the teachers who were there with us mostly spoke to my mom and dad. But that didn't matter to me. Of course, they spoke to me too, but not as much. The most important thing was that they [the teachers] got all the info they needed. Whether that info came from my mom and dad or myself wasn't important. At any rate, I felt I was treated with the same amount of respect as the others.

This clearly shows that the student noticed that the professionals tended to address questions to his parents instead of him. The statement 'At any rate, I felt I was treated with the same amount of respect as the others' suggests that this did not have a negative impact on the student's assessment of himself as an equal participant. As to the students who voiced dissatisfaction since they perceived professionals addressed more questions to their parents, this sentiment was based on a belief that they could have responded just as well to the questions as their parents. Pelle, a student with reading, writing and numeracy difficulties, had the following to say in that regard:

I remember how the tutor hardly spoke to me, but only to my parents. The worst part was how she often asked questions that I could easily have answered myself. It gave me the impression that my views weren't as important.

The above excerpt reveals that the student had information that he wanted to share. The fact that he did not always get the opportunity to do so made him feel that his 'views weren't as important' as the rest of the interlocutors.

When it comes to the parents, the findings show they too felt that the professionals addressed them more often. Those who described this as unproblematic argued they had a greater understanding of their child's strengths and challenges at home and in school than the students, and that is why the professionals addressed them more frequently. Kathinka, Camilla's mother, believed otherwise:

I reacted strongly to the fact that the teachers spoke so little to Camilla. It made no sense. After all, she was the only person in the meeting who really ought to have been given the chance to speak, especially since she would be the one receiving the special education.

As this excerpt goes to shows, the parent found it problematic that the professionals spoke 'so little' to her daughter, as she felt that the recipient of the special education 'really ought to have been given the chance to speak'.

The parents also commented on whether the professionals appreciated students' contributions to the meetings. Their descriptions suggest that the appreciation of student contributions varied to a great extent. Esther, Vidar's mother, noted the following:

He [the moderator] did a very good job. He started by telling Vidar what the agenda of the meeting was and why it was particularly important for him to find out which options Vidar was for and which he was against. It was great to encounter a teacher who was genuinely interested in Vidar's views.

The above excerpt shows that the moderator stating it was 'particularly important' to hear from the student, probably convinced the parent that the professional saw the student's contribution to the meeting of being of equal value to that of the other participants. However, the findings also indicate that some parents felt the professionals did not attach the same amount of importance to the students' contributions, a sentiment very clearly described by Johann, Emma's father:

We felt that the most important thing for the special educator who was responsible for the ISC was to talk to us, the adults. She didn't seem to be concerned with Emma's [his daughter's] opinions. Maybe she had already spoken so much with her colleagues about how Emma was doing in her subjects that she felt that she didn't need to hear from Emma herself.

This excerpt demonstrates that the parent felt the professional showed little interest in obtaining his daughter's perspective, claiming the professional 'didn't seem to be concerned with Emma's opinions'.

Students' opportunities to take initiative and criticise

The findings show that students to a varying degree were given the opportunity to take the initiative by introducing topics they wished to discuss at the meetings. This happened most often at the start of the meetings, exemplified here by Kathinka's daughter Camilla, who said:

There was so much I wanted to discuss, such as how much homework I was being assigned and how often I had to take tests. But instead they wanted to talk about who should be given the task of helping me in class, what kind of books I should be assigned and things like that. Only once did he [the tutor] ask if there was anything I needed to talk about. That was at the start of the meeting. It was the only opportunity I got.

As the above excerpt goes to show the student's opportunities to introduce topics were limited to the start of the meeting, when the professional asked whether there was anything she 'needed to talk about'. However, the fact that she noted that 'It was the only opportunity I got', suggests she wanted to influence the ISC meetings to a greater extent than she was allowed. Additionally, the findings indicate that students were given fewer opportunities to introduce topics in the dialogue than their parents. Ragnhild, Maria's mother, said the following on this point:

Over the course of the meeting, it became clear to me that they were probably

primarily interested in what I wanted us to discuss. I was asked no less than three times whether there was anything that I, as a mother, wanted to discuss about my daughter. Maria was only asked once.

The fact that the professionals gave the student only one opportunity to introduce topics while the parent was given three, was probably why she was left feeling that the professionals were 'primarily interested' in what she wanted to discuss.

The findings also show that when encouraged by the professionals, students took the initiative to propose changes they felt could improve the teaching. For example, two of the students with dyslexia suggested that the professionals could provide more information verbally in class rather than writing it on the board. While the students focused on the concrete proposals they presented, the parents highlighted the professionals' efforts to give students the opportunity to present such proposals. Svein, Pelle's father, described his own experience as follows:

I'm so pleased with the way the educators tried to figure out what he wanted. After we discussed various aspects of his school day and what could be improved, the tutor [moderator] asked what he [Pelle] wanted. Specifically, he asked good, open questions that created opportunities for Pelle to also chip in with his own proposals.

The excerpt reveals that by asking 'good, open questions', the moderator prompted him to make proposals of his own. Even so, other parents commented that the professionals did not create conditions that were conducive to the students making proposals, as they felt that the professionals were more concerned with presenting their own proposals.

When it comes to student opportunities to criticise the proposals, the findings show that both students and parents felt the professionals were able to criticise the students' proposals, but that they were only to a small degree open to receiving criticism from students about their own proposals. Alex, a student with reading and writing difficulties, described his own experience as follows:

For me, it was pretty lame that she [the tutor] was free to criticise my proposals, but when I occasionally tried to explain why I disagreed with what she had to say, I was told we'd have to discuss that at another time. Which never happened.

This excerpt shows that the student wanted to criticise the professional's proposal, but that he was not given the opportunity to do so. A similar sentiment was echoed by Pernille, Alex' mother, who noted the following:

I saw that Alex only rarely got the chance to say what he thought about the proposals suggested by that particular tutor. To me, it seemed like it was more important for the teachers to find out whether I agreed with what they were saying than to find out what Alex thought about what was being said.

This reveals not only that the student was given limited opportunities to comment on the professionals' proposals, but also that the professionals seemingly were more interested in what Alex' mother thought about their proposals rather than Alex' opinions.

Discussion and final comments

The aim of the present study has been to obtain knowledge about whether the dialogue taking place in ISC meetings between students, their parents, and professionals is deliberative.

With respect to students' opportunities for taking part in the dialogue, the findings show that their evaluation of the dialogue they observed during the ISC meeting influenced their own opportunities to participate. Students who witnessed a dialogue characterised by professionals talking quickly found it difficult to participate. The fact that the professionals made it difficult for students to participate in the dialogue could arguably be interpreted as a violation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), which establishes the right of the child to express his or her views and to have those views respected and properly taken into consideration. The problem is that the professionals were unable to create 'an environment that enables the child to exercise her or his right to be heard' (CRC 2009, 7).

One potential consequence of this is that students' views are only discussed to a small degree in ISC meetings, because students find it challenging to be involved in the discussion. Bearing this in mind, a typical characteristic of what Englund (2003, 67) refers to as 'a deliberative dialogue', is that differing perceptions can be challenged in such a dialogue. Taking this a step further, it is unfortunate that students find it difficult to take part in an evaluative dialogue with the professionals. The fact that some students found it difficult to participate in the dialogue because of the professionals' use of unfamiliar terms and expressions, also indicates a violation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). As Test et al. (2004) point out, speaking in terms that are comprehensible helps to increase students' participation in ISC meetings. Correspondingly, speaking in terms the students find incomprehensible is likely to reduce their participation, which the present study findings confirm. Overall, this shows that students' assessment of the professionals' dialogue influences what Habermas (1996, 305) refers to as 'taking part' in the dialogue.

On the other hand, some students and parents noted that the professionals attempted to include students in the dialogue, albeit with mixed results. This is consistent with previous findings from a quantitative web based survey in which principals, special education directors, and special educators reported that they encourage students to actively participate in ISC meetings (Martin et al. 2004). Findings of the present study reveal that the informants felt that some professionals attempted to include them in the dialogue by asking them questions. These professionals wanted to give the students what Habermas (1996, 305) refers to as an 'opportunity to take part'. This is further supported by research which shows that aiming questions directly at students during ISC meetings increases their participation (Test et al. 2004). Nonetheless, some of the informants noted that the professionals' efforts to include them were minimal at best. The fact that some of the students also feel that they were only marginally included in the dialogue, is further supported by the findings of another qualitative study of ISC meetings (Bray and Russell 2016), which showed that students had a passive role in meetings.

Another finding was that students expected to be informed about the professionals' expectations regarding their participation, without this expectation being fulfilled. In these cases, the findings show a negative effect on the students' opportunities to take part in the dialogue. As demonstrated by Vidar's account, his need for information

about his own role was not met, so he adopted a passive role during the meeting. This is consistent with earlier research, which shows that students do not receive sufficient information about their participation in ISC meetings (e.g. Martin, Marshall, and Sale 2004; Thoma, Rogan, and Baker 2001). One consequence is that students fail to understand both what is being discussed and the terms being used (e.g. Martin, Marshall, and Sale 2004). Our findings here suggest that when students did not receive information about the professionals' expectations for them, they were likely to adopt a more passive role during the meeting. Habermas (1996, 305) argues that a key characteristic of 'processes of deliberation' is that 'all of those who are possibly affected by the decisions have equal chances to enter and take part.' Bearing this in mind, there is all the more reason for concern, as a lack of information makes it more challenging for the students, who will be the recipients of the special education discussed at the meeting, to take sufficient part in the dialogue.

The findings indicate that the professionals to a varying degree considered students as equal participants in ISC meetings. Students and parents noted that the professionals would more frequently address the students' parents rather than the students, even when asking for insights into the students' school life. This is consistent with the study conducted by Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004, 286), which found that the professionals 'directed most of their comments to the parents.' The fact that the findings of the current study are consistent with the 2004 study may indicate that professionals view students' parents as 'more equal' participants than the students. One possible reason for this may be that the professionals regard the parents as a more important source of information about students' experiences, perhaps even more important than the students proper. The parents also found that the professionals were more focused on obtaining their views than the views of students'. This agrees with a study in which 51 parents of children receiving special teaching were asked if they felt that professionals 'treated them as equal partners in IEP meetings' (Fish 2008, 11), the US equivalent of Norwegian ISC meetings. The findings revealed that 96% felt that they were indeed treated as equal partners. If professionals more frequently turn the discussion towards the students' parents, students might have fewer opportunities to participate in the dialogue. This, in turn, would be problematic, as one of Habermas (1996, 305) key requirements for deliberative meetings is that the participants have 'equal chances to enter'.

Another reason why professionals possibly ascribe more importance to parent contribution than student contribution, may be that they have concluded that parents are a more reliable source of information, on basis of a consideration of the individual student's learning difficulties, communicative skills, etc. Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) states that when assessing how much importance to attach to the child's (in this case, the student's) views, the professionals may take their age and level of maturity into consideration. However, the article does not support the notion that the professionals may use such factors as an argument for effectively reducing the students' opportunities for taking part in the dialogue determining their special education by focusing on the parents instead. This is further supported by Nordmann (2001), who notes that students with disabilities have a moral right to voice their opinion on their education. Even though Habermas (1996) does not use the term 'rights' when discussing who should participate in 'processes of deliberation', he points out that the participants are the ones who are affected by the decisions that are reached. It is indisputable that decisions concerning the contents of special education

programmes affect students. The importance of bringing to light the views of students who are affected by decisions, is mentioned by Messiou and Hope (2015), who maintain that involving students in issues concerning their own learning may result in professional and new perspectives.

As Camilla's comments point out, the students were not satisfied with the opportunities given to introduce topics. The findings from the present study show they were given fewer opportunities compared with their parents to introduce topics at meetings. One possible consequence is that parents will speak more often than students at meetings. The fact that parents speak more than students at ISC meetings was confirmed in a study focusing on who does the talking and how much (Martin et al. 2006), which shows that the students' family spoke 15% of the time, while students only spoke 3% of the time. The findings of the present study indicate that as a result of professionals giving students and parents opportunities to introduce topics at the meeting, the dialogue was deliberative. However, a key component of Habermas (1996) 'processes of deliberation' is that participants are given the opportunity to contribute. The fact that students and parents did not have equal opportunities for contributing indicates that the dialogue was not deliberative, as Habermas (1996, 305) specifies that each participant should have 'equal opportunity ... to introduce topics.'

The findings show that when encouraged by the professionals, students took the initiative both by introducing topics they wanted to discuss in the ISC meetings and by suggesting changes to the teaching. There were only a few instances where the informants from each group noted that the students were not allowed to make their own proposals. The fact that the students contributed to the dialogue in the form of proposed changes is consistent with previous findings from Wagner et al. (2012, 151), where around half of the students in the 11–19 age bracket present in ISC meetings 'were reported to have provided 'some input' regardless of age.' The findings showing that students made proposals for changes relating to the classroom instruction would indicate that the dialogue was deliberative, as Habermas (1996) points out that deliberation is characterised by each participant making their own proposals.

With respect to the students' opportunities to criticise proposals suggested by others, both students and their parents felt they were given few opportunities to criticise the professionals' proposals. Conversely, they felt that the professionals often criticised their proposals. A potential reason why students seemingly had fewer opportunities for criticising proposals might be that the professionals 'may perceive that their authority will be undermined when students are able to voice their opinions and views' (Byrnes and Rickards 2011, 26). Seen in light of the present study, this could mean that the professionals feared their authority would be undermined by giving students the opportunity to comment negatively on proposals based on their professional opinion. Another possible reason could be that the professionals had already reached a final decision on the contents of the student's ISC prior to the meeting, therefore seeking to avoid engaging in a discussion, fearing they might have to revise their initial decision. Such an interpretation is supported by earlier research (Asp-Onsjö 2006, 218) which found that professionals only communicate with students and parents once important decisions have already been made. A third reason may be that the professionals feared the ISC meeting would be less productive if students were given the opportunity to criticise their proposals. However, research shows that a precondition for the ISC process to be productive is, as

Rodger (1995, 235) states, that ‘attention must be given to the key participants – the student, the parents and the team members ...’ If the above idea were to be applied to the present study, the fact that the interlocutors criticised each other’s proposals – even if they were not all given equal opportunities to do so – would indicate that the dialogue was deliberative.

The findings indicating that the dialogue was *not* deliberative are that the professionals (1) used a language that students did not understand, (2) addressed parents more often than the students and (3) gave the students few opportunities for criticising their proposals. Findings in the opposite direction are that the professionals (1) attempted to include students both by encouraging them to introduce topics for the dialogue and to present their own proposals and (2) emphasised that the students were equal participants by expressing they were interested in their views. The conclusion of the study is that dialogue in ISC meetings alternates between being deliberative and non-deliberative.

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. One limitation is that the researcher was not present during the ISC meetings described by the students and their parents. Consequently, the researcher was unable to verify the participants’ descriptions of events and discussions that transpired in the meetings. A second limitation is that contents may have gone lost in the translation from Norwegian into English. However, it is reasonable to believe that is the case only to a limited degree, as text editing was carried out by an expert with a command of Norwegian and English. An aspect of Norwegian culture that may have impacted on the results is the set of rules that gives children a particular right to be heard. The Norwegian Constitution (1814, Section 104) gives children ‘the right to be heard in questions that concern them, and due weight shall be attached to their views in accordance with their age and development.’ From an overall perspective, national regulations that explicitly express children’s right to participate may possibly explain students’ and parents’ expectations for professionals to include students in dialogues.

Notwithstanding the limitations mentioned above, the study has two main practical implications. First, the findings demonstrate that it is important to train professionals on how to include students in the dialogue in ISC meetings, as well as how to create an atmosphere that encourages student participation. Second, the findings show the need for establishing guidelines that describe the expectations that professionals can set for students’ participation in ISC meetings, and how to communicate these guidelines to students and their parents. It is likely that such guidelines will facilitate students’ participation in the dialogue and make it easier for professionals to include them in the dialogue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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