

## *Creating an Inclusive and Health Promoting Learning Environment in Primary School*

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### **Abstract**

Many students struggle with mental health issues and low motivation in today's school, and the problems often start as early as primary school. Surveys show that children at the age of ten to twelve struggle with loneliness, sadness, low self-esteem, bullying, stress and physical problems. One of five dread going to school. The current study presents an approach that can be applied to facilitate for making the children themselves engaged in creating a safe, health promoting and inclusive learning environment for everyone in primary school. This approach includes five steps, which are identifying 1) what is important, 2) success factors, 3) obstacles, 4) what needs focus and 5) what specifically can be done to change the situation. The students reflect on these questions individually in writing and through discussions in class. In this way, the children themselves find solutions to obstacles under guidance from an adult. Results on evaluations from four fifth grade groups show that of 58 students, 38 felt the method helped them find out what is important, 31 became motivated, 45 managed to follow their own plans, 31 became better at finding solutions, 44 enjoyed more being together in school and 36 liked using the method. We conclude that children in primary school may be engaged in influencing their learning environment and their own situation in a positive direction when teachers facilitate for this.

Keywords: Health Promotion, Motivation, Learning Environment, Inclusion

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## Introduction

Most students in Norwegian primary school report that they experience a positive learning environment, but there are quite a few students who do not share this feeling. In general, there is an increase in mental health issues in Norway (Meld. St. 19, 2018-2019, and about seven percentage of children in school-age have symptoms of mental suffering (Reneflot et al., 2018). Surveys for students aged 10 to 12 years show that quite a few students are being bullied or feel lonely or stressed, and one of five reports dreading going to school (Løvgren & Svagård, 2019). These results are confirmed through surveys for all students in primary school carried out yearly (Udir, n. d.). About 5,9 % of the students are generally being bullied in primary school, and these numbers are quite constant from year to year. Being exposed to bullying may have serious consequences, such as low self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Breivik et al., 2017). It may also have consequences for school-related activities through lack of mastery, low performance and school absence. As the consequences of bullying are very serious, it is important to facilitate for creating inclusive learning environments for students, environments free of bullying. The current study investigates the potential of a systematic approach focused on mastery, participation and motivation, to facilitate for a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment.

According to the Norwegian Education Act (1998 § 9a), every student has the right to a safe and good learning environment that promotes health, well-being, and learning. They have the right to be included and to have a natural place in the school, as well as to feel that they contribute in a meaningful way and participate in forming their own conditions (Meld. St. 6, 2019-2020, p. 11). In health-promoting theory, the aspect of meaningfulness is also emphasised, meaning that one sees the value of one's own contribution, and feel that it is possible to influence situations (Antonovsky, 2012). This is the most important out of three factors that together constitute what Antonovsky (2012) calls a "sense of coherence" (SOC). The other two factors are comprehensibility, meaning that one understands a situation and incidents that occur, and manageability, meaning that one sees one's own resources and believe in having the ability to cope. Having a sense of coherence, contributes to experiencing well-being and good mental health (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2016; Moksnes et al., 2014), and in school, it supports students to develop resilience to cope with stressful situations (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006). Hence, creating an inclusive and health-promoting learning environment means to facilitate for students to participate in activities they understand and master, as well as letting them influence their own situation in school in meaningful ways.

## Anti-bullying programmes and understandings of bullying

The challenges described in the current study are not new, and there have been several programmes nationally, over years, that have dealt with creating a bullying-free or positive learning environment. The Scandinavian researcher Olweus put anti-bullying research on the agenda, both nationally and internationally, and is known for the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme* (2004). Large-scale studies carried out in the late 1990s over four years, showed a significant decrease in bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2012). The programme was also implemented internationally in different contexts (Bauer et al., 2007; Black & Jackson, 2007; Limber et al., 2004; Melton et al., 1998; Pagliocca et al., 2007). Other Norwegian large-scale programmes carried out at the beginning of year 2000, called *Zero* (Roland et al., 2010) and *Respect* (Ertesvåg, 2009; Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007), show similar results. All three

programmes represented whole-school-approaches which included measures on school-level, class-level, individual level, and community level.

Clear rules and modification of behaviour through consequences are central elements in all three programmes, which place them within the behavioural-cognitive tradition (Vogt, 2016). Another programme with a more positive focus, called *Positive behaviour, supporting learning environment and collaboration (PALS)*, was implemented during the same period, and this programme also showed some positive results in student behaviour (Arnesen et al., 2003). Even though the programme has a more positive focus, it still builds on some of the same theoretical basis as the anti-bullying programmes, since using rewards to modify and support positive behaviour is a central element. With such strong emphasis on modification of behaviour, the programmes could be said to build on a deterministic view on humans as results of reinforcements and consequences (Johannessen et al., 2010).

The anti-bullying programmes described above all build on Olweus' definition of bullying: "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students» (Olweus, 2012, p. 11). There is an emphasis of the individual in this understanding, and students are defined as either bullies or victims of bullying. This understanding has been criticised and is generally referred to as the first paradigm within anti-bullying-research (Lund & Helgeland, 2020). In the second paradigm, there is more focus on bullying as social processes, and bullying is described as processes of inclusion and exclusion (Jørgensen, 2019). Bullying represents exclusion for the persons being bullied, and at the same time, there is an inclusion process where some are included in the group bullying others. Sometimes, the boundary between being bullied and being a bully is unclear, as students may be in both categories (Amundsen & Garmannslund, 2020). This is because these social processes of exclusion and inclusion are dynamic, and not constant. If the problem exists in the social processes, the solution to the problem is perhaps also to be found in social processes. This is what is argued in the current study where a five-step approach to mastery, participation and motivation has been implemented to facilitate for engaging students in creating positive social processes in classes.

### **Engagement through self-determination**

The systematic approach implemented in this study, builds partly on health-promoting theory and partly on self-determination theory (Langeland & Horverak, 2021). Whereas health-promoting theory is concerned with how to create a sense of coherence (SOC) through meaningfulness, comprehensibility and manageability (Antonovsky, 2012), self-determination theory (SDT) is focused on how to achieve intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to SDT, intrinsic motivation, which means a wish or desire to do something, is enhanced through meeting the three basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. This means that a student experience mastery and control of one's own situation, as well as being part of a community. Ryan and Deci's (2020) meta-analysis on studies based on self-determination theory shows that there is a positive relation between autonomy-based motivation or autonomy-support in classes on the one side, and results in subjects, perceived competence and self-esteem on the other side. There is some overlap between the two theories which the five-step method applied in this study builds on, as both are concerned with feeling mastery and in control. By facilitating for autonomy, students become involved in finding solutions to the challenges that exist in the school environment, and through this, they participate to create a better and more inclusive learning environment.

## Methodology

This study investigates the potential of a five-step method for mastery, participation, and motivation in relation to engaging students in primary school to create a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment. To do so, an intervention has been carried out in four fifth-grade groups, resulting in 58 respondents (response rate 70 %). Reflections and evaluations have been collected from the intervention. In addition to this intervention in classes, the five-step method has also been implemented in the school through the student council with focus on improving the learning environment. The students themselves carried out the method in their own classes with support from the teacher. Material from the student council intervention is dealt with in a separate study, but the fact that there were two quite similar parallel interventions going on may have influenced the process in the four groups that are included in the current study. Qualitative and quantitative data are combined in the analysis, making this a mixed-method study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The intervention included a five-step method for supporting mastery, participation and motivation, developed in the project SAMM (<https://samm.uia.no/en/frontpage/>). The five steps include identifying 1) what is important to feel good, 2) success factors, both in the individual and in the surroundings, 3) obstacles, 4) identifying a focus area, and 5) deciding on strategies to work with to make a change. In the first session, the students answered question one to three through a class discussion, and then they answered individually in books. The individual notes were all anonymous, and the students used codes on the books only they knew instead of names. The teacher collected the books, and in the second session of the intervention, a summary from the books was presented to the class. Based on the reflections, they discussed what they needed to focus on, and how they could do this. Then, they retrieved their books, by identifying their codes, and they wrote down focus areas and strategies they chose, making individual action plans. In the third and fourth sessions, the action plans were followed up, evaluated and specified. The students' reflections and action plans in the books are included as data material in the current study. In the results section, examples from the students' reflections on what is important and different obstacles are presented, as well as chosen focus areas and strategies.

To evaluate the method, the students filled in a questionnaire with claims and a likert scale of five, from "totally disagree" to "totally agree". The claims concerned whether the method helped them finding out what is important in school and in their spare time, whether the method made them want to work with what is important, whether they had managed to follow their own plans, whether they had become better at finding solutions to challenges, whether it helped them enjoy more being together in school and whether they liked the method. In addition, they were asked about their chosen focus areas. The results of the closed questions in the questionnaire are presented as bar charts.

All the material in the study has been collected anonymously, as the students have only written personal codes on all the material, and there is no key available concerning what code belongs to which student. The students' parents were given written information about the project and the data collection through a learning platform, and they were informed that participation in research was voluntary, and that they could contact the responsible researcher if they wanted to withdraw from the study. If this had happened, the teachers would have been informed so they could sort the material. The students also consented to participating in research by crossing out "yes" to this on the questionnaire. If answering "no", the book with a matching code was also removed from the data material.

## Results

To investigate how students may be engaged in creating a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment, results from the implementation of a systematic approach facilitating for mastery, participation and motivation are presented. This approach starts with identifying what is important for the students, by asking them to answer this question. The responses show that they generally thought it is important with friends, family, pets and activities, and these elements were also reported as success factors. In addition, some students wrote that it is important that everyone has friends and that no one is bullied, and this reflects obstacles the students reported. More of the students wrote about being bullied. One student wrote “that some boys bully me because they think I am weak because I am small”. Another student wrote “when someone says ugly things about me, I become sad”.

When discussing obstacles and making action plans, the most prominent theme was making sure everyone is okay, and that there is no bullying. The students suggested strategies as being a good friend, inviting others to play, saying nice things to each other and being good friends. In addition they wrote about interfering when bullying takes place, for example by saying “stop, don’t bully, this is my friend”. They also reported caring strategies, like comforting those who are sad and to be there for those who are being bullied. The second main focus area that the classes focused on is noise in class and making efforts to be more silent in class. This focus area was chosen in agreement with the teachers, and also influenced by the parallel process going on with the method being implemented through the student council, where this was mentioned as a big challenge. The students chose strategies as watching their own behaviour, being quiet, not throughing comments or shouting. One student wrote “not laugh when others are trying to be funny”.

The results from the evaluation show that the implementation of the five-step method has great potential to engage students in creating a better learning environment, and that the students were positive to using the method (figure 1).

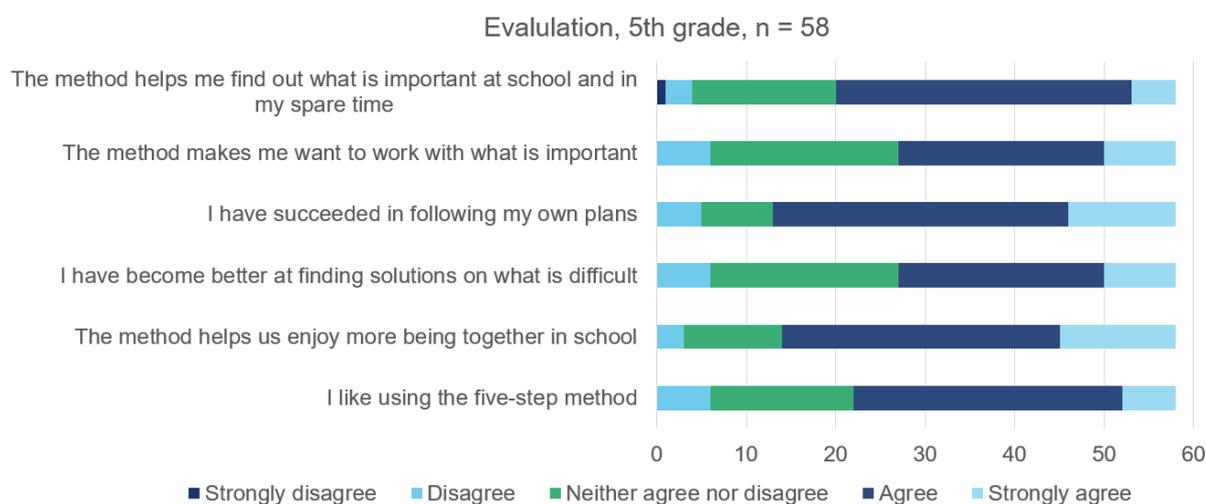


Figure 1: Results of the evaluation of the five-step method

Of 58 students, 38 agreed that the method helped them find out what was important and 31 agreed that the method motivated them to work with this. As much as 45 students reported that they had followed their own plans, and 31 agreed that they had become better at finding solutions to challenges. The focus in the action plans was on creating a better learning

environment for everyone, and 44 agreed that the method helped them enjoy being together. Finally, 36 students agreed that they liked using the five-step method. These results show that the majority of the students benefited from the implementation of the method.

## Discussion

The results of this study show that the five-step method implemented may facilitate for students becoming engaged in creating an inclusive and health-promoting learning environment. They suggested good strategies, many followed up as planned, and they experienced that this supported a positive atmosphere. The process described in this study supports meeting official requirements in the Norwegian educational context as described in the Education Act (1998, § 9a), that every student has the right to a safe and good learning environment. It also facilitates for getting students engaged in a meaningful way to form their own learning condition, which is also a requirement expressed through official guidelines in Norway (Meld. St. 6, 2019-2020). This process of engaging students as agents may lead to experiencing mastery, as is seen in the results of the evaluations, which again may lead to increased belief of mastery in future situation. This is what is called self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006). Increased self-efficacy supports students to take the role of agents in new situations, which again may promote success (see figure 2). This may result in a positive cycle of increasing agency and getting increased self-efficacy.

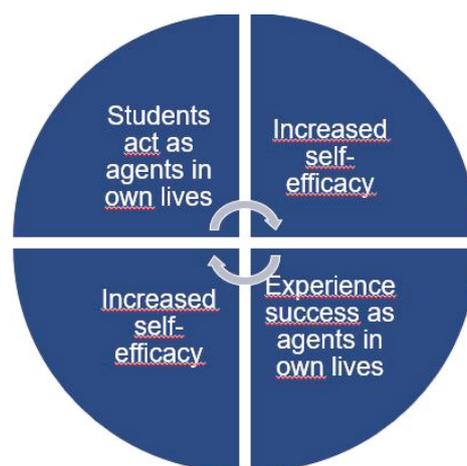


Figure 2: Based on Bandura, 1997, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018

A challenge with these processes is that if students do not succeed with taking agency, they may experience failure which leads to a decrease in self-efficacy, and the cycle may become negative. Because of decreased failure, they do not dare taking the role of being an agent in future situations, and then miss out on the opportunities to succeed and experience increased self-efficacy. The Norwegian professor in psychology, Madsen (2020), criticises universal measures in general because of this type of risk. He claims that students who struggle to start with most likely will struggle to follow up on universal measures including elements of self-regulation, and that students who succeed in general, will benefit from them. In the current study, this aspect has not been investigated, and there is a risk that those who agree that the method is beneficial in different ways are the students who master school in general. To avoid increasing the gap between the students through applying universal measures, it is important that the teachers are aware of different individual needs and support the students who need this in the process. It may also be wrong to assume that children who struggle with

self-regulation cannot benefit from approaches emphasising this. A meta-analysis of studies on how to support students in middle school with behavioural problems shows that self-regulation is an important element of programmes that have a positive effect on both behaviour and learning for these students (Alperin et al., 2021).

Something that separates the current study from many other programmes that aim to create positive learning environments, is the strong role of the students in the five-step approach presented here, compared with anti-bullying programmes that emphasise the adult's role and actions (Ertesvåg, 2009; Olweus & Limber, 2012; Roland et al., 2010). In the anti-bullying programmes, it is up to the teacher to find solutions and follow up on these, whereas the five-step approach calls for the students to deal with challenges. Engaging the students in this way gives them autonomy in the situation, which again may lead to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It also helps the students understand situations and find resources to deal with them, which may lead to an increased sense of coherence, and help them deal with stressful situations (Antonovsky, 2012). It also includes working with the structures of inclusion and exclusion in the environment, which relates to the newer understandings of bullying (Jørgensen, 2019) rather than singling out students as either bullies or victims of bullying, as the anti-bullying programmes do (Ertesvåg, 2009; Olweus & Limber, 2012; Roland et al., 2010).

There is a different view on humans represented in the different programmes. The anti-bullying programmes and the positive behaviour-programme presented above (Arnesen et al., 2003; Ertesvåg, 2009; Olweus & Limber, 2012; Roland et al., 2010) are based on a behavioural tradition (Vogt, 2016), where students are rewarded for good behaviour, and must deal with consequences of negative behaviour. This builds on a deterministic view on humans as being possible to manipulate and control through reinforcement (Johannessen et al., 2010). The five-step approach implemented in the current study, builds on a more humanistic view on humans, as having the potential to grow and take control of their own development and make the right choices (Johannessen et al., 2010). This includes giving students autonomy in the learning situation, which is important to develop intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It also supports them to understand the situation and find ways to handle it, which leads to a sense of coherence and an ability to cope with stress (Antonovsky, 2012). When the students themselves find solutions to challenges, there may be a greater chance that they feel ownership towards the strategies they have decided on, and they may be more loyal in following up.

The results in the current study are in line with previous studies from the project SAMM, showing that the five-step approach has the potential to support students in understanding what is important, find solutions to challenges, and make and follow up on action plans (Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak & Espegren, 2021; Horverak & Jenssen, 2020; Horverak, 2020). Even though the results here show a potential, they are based on self-reported data, and it may not be a fact that students for example have followed up on their plans, even though they report this. It is also a challenge that the current study is limited in scope, both when it comes to the number of informants and the time-period for the intervention. The intervention included only four sessions, which may be too little to expect any changes. Still, the results mirror results from other studies based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), showing that autonomy is related to perceived competence and self-esteem in a positive way. Even though these type of concepts have not been measured here, the results signal that the approach has the potential to support students' motivation and engagement in school.

## **Conclusion**

Children in primary school may be engaged in influencing their learning environment and their own situation in a positive direction when teachers facilitate for this. The results in this study show that by applying the five-step method, the teacher may facilitate for creating a more health-promoting and inclusive learning environment by making the students agents in the process. There is a risk that some students benefit less from the approach, and perhaps these are students who struggle in general. Still, by taking part in the joint efforts that are facilitated, they may feel a success in class by experiencing that the class succeeds in making a change. However, not all challenges may be dealt with by the students themselves, and it is important that the adult, responsible person helps the students sort what they can change themselves, and what others should take responsibility for. Another important aspect to remember is that making changes requires continuity over time. The current study presents a short-term intervention, in a very limited context, and there is a need to investigate more long-term effects of applying the method in a large-scale study.

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