Youth Participation and the Six Cs: An Application of the Logic Model of Positive Youth Development to the Dream School Program in Norway

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Abstract

Given the strong link between education, health, positive development and success in life, schools are a crucial setting for stimulating positive development. The Dream School program in Norwegian upper secondary schools aims to improve the psychosocial learning environment and promote mental health through greater student involvement, and foster an inclusive culture as a whole. By applying a logic model of positive youth development to the Dream School program, this chapter describes the theory behind the five and six Cs, and the positive empirical impact and challenges of involving youth as peer mentors in the program. The peer mentors were seen to experience positive feelings and develop leadership skills while assisting their fellow students and contributing to the school environment. Evaluation of the mentoring role shows that to move beyond merely token participation and involvement, it is crucial for all adults to support peer mentors and see them as a resource.

Keywords: Positive youth development, peer mentors, Dream School program, youth participation

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Empowering young people through positive youth development (PYD) is an important goal for future societal development, as well as for the young people themselves. However, descriptions of youth development programs are often brief, and mainly concern the effects of the program rather than the theoretical foundations and the process of empowering young people. The novel contribution of this chapter is to provide a thorough description of a Norwegian PYD program (the Dream School) and its impact by applying a logic model to describe the specific process. This includes the program elements, the pedagogical methods, the practical application of the five Cs of PYD in the program and their impact, with emphasis on peer mentors' experiences. Thus, the first part of the chapter presents the theoretical material, followed by empirical evidence of the impact of the program on youth participation. We then outline the implications for policy, practice and research.

The Norwegian Context and the School Setting

Norway is a small but rich country in the global context with approximately 5.3 million people, a GDP per inhabitant that is 50% higher than the EU average, and an unemployment rate of 3.9% (Statistics Norway, 2018a). In 2018, there are approximately 450,000 youths aged 13–19 years. The proportion of immigrants in Norway is 14%, or 750,000 people, and of these approximately 30,000 are aged 16–19 years (Statistics Norway, 2018b).

Norway is a unitary state with a well-developed welfare services and benefits system, characterized by a social democratic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Compared with other countries, Norway should have robust conditions for positive development owing to its fundamental welfare state ideas, but the country has also been at the forefront in recognizing international conventions on humanitarianism, solidarity, equal rights and opportunities, and justice (Aadnesen & Hærem, 2007). The Norwegian school system is

obligated by law to secure equal rights for every child, independent of social class, gender, age, religion or ethnicity. These core values are based on UNESCO's Salamanca Declaration and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The latter was ratified in Norway in 2013 (Danielsen, 2017). Since 1994, all students have been granted free entry to upper secondary schools in line with the principle of equal rights for every student.

The School Setting Is Important for Empowering Youth

Given the strong link between education, health, positive development and success in life, schools are one of the most important settings for stimulating positive development (Larsen, 2016). Engaging young people's own resources can enhance their sense of motivation and belonging to their schools, which can improve their well-being and prevent them from dropping out (Scales, Benson, Oesterle, Hill, Hawkins, & Pashak, 2016). All schools in Norway are mandated by the National Education Act (2017) to promote a good psychosocial environment where students can experience participation, security and social affiliation. Despite this, the drop-out rate from upper secondary schools in Norway has been too high for many years (Lillejord et al., 2015), and the cost of dropping out is estimated to be 1 million NOK (approx. €100,000) per person (Falch, Johannesen, & Strøm, 2009); thus, efforts to promote retention are crucial for reasons of both cost and quality of life.

According to Ozer and Douglas (2015), many secondary school environments, especially in large US public schools, do not respond sufficiently well to adolescents' growing needs for autonomy and capacities for leadership. Consequently, this developmental mismatch results in fewer opportunities for adolescents to participate in making decisions and rules during the transition from elementary to secondary school. There are similar findings from Norwegian secondary schools (Lillejord et al., 2015). Likewise, Kim, Oesterle, Catalano, and Hawkins (2015) found that protective factors for youth (e.g., opportunities for prosocial involvement in school and the community and interactions with prosocial peers)

decrease in middle school, but increase upon transition to high school, when the students again become the youngest in their schools. Kim et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of providing opportunities for involvement—such as leadership and participation in more meaningful activities—to avoid decreased engagement, and to allow for continued building of protective factors.

The Dream School Program Enables PYD

The Dream School program aims to improve the psychosocial learning environment and engender positive mental health through greater student involvement and fostering an inclusive culture in a school as a whole. The Dream School emphasizes an optimistic view of youths and their development; that is, all young people can thrive when their unique personal strengths are aligned with the strengths and opportunities afforded by their contexts (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009).

The Dream School is intended to facilitate and nurture the development of the five Cs: competence, caring, confidence, character and connection through peer and teacher support, and through participatory learning activities that involve social skills training. A program logic model (Figure 1) illustrates the application of the five Cs in accordance with the various key elements of the program. Activities take place in the classroom and on the school premises. Older students are trained as peer mentors to facilitate the program. They work in close collaboration with teachers and the resource group. A sixth C, contribution (ability to contribute), is expected to develop as a result of the other Cs, meaning that youth feel that they are competent, confident in themselves, have good morals and a sense of belonging, and they can receive and provide care (Lerner et al., 2005).

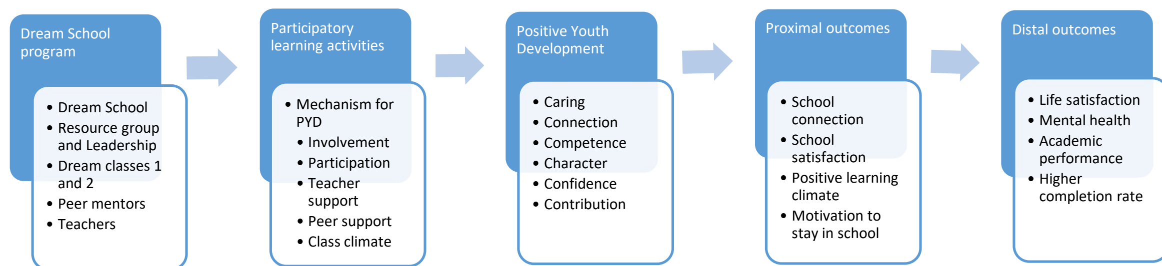

Figure 1. Logic model for the Dream School program

Specifically, the Dream School achieves its goals through four main elements: the Dream Class, the peer mentors, the resource group, and the teachers.

The Dream Class. All new classes in the first or second week go through the Dream Class 1, which consists of two three-hour sessions facilitated by the resource team and the peer mentors. A follow-up of the Dream Class (2) takes place in January in the spring (i.e., second) semester. The students and teachers are active participants. The Dream Class aims to provide the teacher and the class with tools to establish a good psychosocial environment, characterized by safety, belonging, positive communication and good relations between the students and the teacher, and to develop an action plan for the class to use throughout the school year. The teacher has a special responsibility to follow up the action plan. Central questions raised in class are: *What would a good class environment look like?* and *What can we do to create such an environment in class?*

Peer mentors. Peer mentors are older students trained to facilitate the program and to mentor the new classes. Students are invited via posters, school newspapers and school webpages to apply for the role as peer mentors. The school seeks to recruit students who are engaged and motivated to do something for other students. The students are then interviewed

and selected by the resource group. The aim is to select motivated peer mentors with credibility among other students. They represent a heterogeneous student group in terms of gender and academic performance. They receive two days of training (outside school premises) by the NGO named Adults for Children (www.vfb.no) in how to be a good peer leader, and how to manage activities in class and at school. The NGO also brings the students and resource groups together at a later time during the year to share experiences. The peer mentors are supervised by the resource group throughout the year. In addition to participating in the Dream Class, two or three peer mentors are responsible for following up their assigned class (mentor class) during the school year, and for creating activities open to all students on school premises.

The resource group. The resource group includes representatives from the school management, staff and student council, and represents a broad anchoring of the program in the whole school. The resource group is trained at the same time as the peer mentors and followed up by members from the NGO. The resource group has a special obligation to facilitate the Dream Class sessions alongside the peer mentors, and to follow up the peer mentors throughout the school year.

The teachers. The teachers receive half a day of training by Adults for Children. They are introduced to the teachers' role in the program, which is to participate with the students in the Dream Class session and to be responsible for following up the action plan throughout the school year. The action plan is the product of the Dream Class session, and it specifically states what the class will work on to become a Dream Class. The teachers are an important collaboration partner for the peer mentors in their work with the class. They initiate collaboration by inviting the peer mentors to take part in sessions where the class discusses the action plan.

In the program, participatory learning activities (PLAs) and solution-focused methods are used at all levels of training. These are methods that emphasize the active involvement and participation of all students. The methods focus on the development of communication skills, making one's own choices and interacting with others. Teachers and peer mentors apply these methods in their implementation of the program at school. Johnson (2008) notes that teachers who promote or strengthen student resilience resources are characterized by being available, listening, actively taking responsibility for students' learning, showing empathy, using their power as adults to oppose bullying and harassment, commitment to creating social ties and mobilizing resources to help those who need them. In particular, students are trained to increase their understanding of the importance of their own and others' well-being. In addition, they are enabled to initiate psychosocial measures in the school environment, and through such measures, they can gain experience in leadership and in helping others.

The Dream School and the Five and Six Cs

The PYD framework proposes the five Cs of connection, competence, caring, confidence and character, which in turn lead to a sixth C, contribution (Lerner, Phelps, et al., 2009). These are seen as important for enabling PYD, as the underlying notion is that building strengths in these Cs will lead to positive development. In PYD theory, development is seen as an interaction between individuals and their contexts; thus, the environment (such as a school) can either nurture or hinder this interaction.

Connection. The most influential factor in the PLA methods and the actions in the program is connection or belonging. Connection concerns building positive relationships between people and institutions where both parties contribute to the relationship (Lerner et al., 2005). Feeling connected is strongly linked to subjective well-being. Settertobulte and Matos (2004) found that being liked and accepted by fellow students is crucial for young people's

positive development. Those who are not socially integrated are more likely to have trouble in relation to their mental health (Settertobulte & Matos, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to facilitate the experience of belonging right from the start of the school year. Hattie and Yates (2013) noted that one of the most important factors to succeed in school was making at least one friend during the first few weeks. Another factor involved the student being noticed by an adult and being told that the adult was looking out for the student. In line with this, the peer mentors' primary task is to welcome the students to the school and to work with the teachers to create an inclusive class and school environment. Good relationships are important, and Lillejord et al. (2015) argue that positive relationships are one of the primary factors in preventing drop-out. In addition, the peer mentors in the Dream School are trained to watch out for those who seem to drop out of social life at school. Lillejord et al. (2015) stress that using older students to mentor the younger ones is a measure that is well supported by research, and has a proven effect in preventing drop-out.

Competence. Competence is a central factor in self-regulation; according to self-determination theory, it is a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Stimulating students' basic needs for competence and giving them mastery experiences are particularly relevant in the school context, as academic achievement (together with connection) is a strong predictor of dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Connecting older peer mentors with the new students can provide useful information and practical advice on making a good start in their new studies, as well as keeping up their studies during the school year and creating a supportive, inclusive class and school environment.

Caring. Caring refers to both caring for others and being cared for by others. It is closely linked to a sense of belonging and being connected (Lerner et al., 2005). Research shows that it is important for the individual's mental health to be seen by others, and to feel

that someone cares for you (Anvik & Gustavsen, 2012). Teachers as well as peer mentors act as caregivers for the new students. Moreover, this provides the peer mentor with a sense of caring for others, which in itself is important for motivation and meaning in life (Holsen, Larsen, Tjomsland, & Servan, 2014).

Confidence. Being seen is also important for confidence, which relates to an internal sense of general positive self-esteem and mastering expectations (Birkeland, Breivik and Wold, 2014). Good self-esteem is reported to be one of the strongest predictors of psychological well-being (Diener, 1994). Birkeland, Breivik, and Wold (2014) found that acceptance from peers had a generally protective effect on global self-esteem for all young people. Other work also shows a clear connection between being ignored in the school context, absenteeism and dropping out (Anvik & Gustavsen, 2012). The use of dedicated peer mentors can protect against not being seen by someone in the school or class. For example, peers can help to provide social interaction, emotional support, social planning, cognitive restructuring and exercise or training (Hattie & Yates, 2013), and through this help to build students' confidence. In addition, the peer mentors themselves gain increased confidence through leading activities and helping others.

Character is about perceptions of right and wrong, values, respect and integrity. An important part of character building is the feeling of having influence over decisions and co-determination in one's own life. In the Dream School, students creating their own rules for the classroom environment can help them to comply better with these rules, and the democratic process of formulating rules can support the students' sense of autonomy and responsibility. Griebler Rojatz, Simovska, and Forster (2017) found that the use of peers in planning, implementing and evaluating health promotion at school was associated with better health and better relationships between students. Positive effects on the individual peer mentor (e.g.,

altruism, helping others, leadership and communication skills) were also found by Holsen et al. (2014).

Schools can help young people to develop leadership and critical thinking by giving them a voice in decisions that affect them (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). If schools provide opportunities for empowerment by facilitating joint decisions with teachers, parents and students, it will stimulate increased confidence and respect for each other's ideas (Griebler et al., 2017). Furthermore, when young people share their experiences with their peers and learn about differences, they break down stereotypes and prejudices (Holsen et al., 2014).

Finally, it is important to stress that all the factors in a PYD model are intertwined in a dynamic interaction and may be mutually reinforcing. As young people spend almost half of their waking time at school, it is obvious that their experience of well-being is influenced by the quality of their relationships with their teachers and fellow students (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). Thus, PYD programs need to be dynamic, build positive relationships and address all of the five Cs.

The Impact of the Dream School Program on Youth Participation

The Dream School takes a strength-based approach and believes that the students themselves are able and want to take responsibility for their own lives and want to co-operate in helping others. This implies that students can and should be given the opportunity to take responsibility and make decisions regarding their own learning environment. The aim of the program can be seen as twofold: to stimulate the sixth C, that is, the contribution of all the students in the school, while at the same time adding a more practical stimulant for the six Cs of the peer mentors. We now describe the methods and results of a qualitative investigation of peer mentors' experiences of the program.

Method

Participants

We conducted nine focus group interviews in three large upper secondary schools as part of a pilot study of the Dream School program (2014–2016). The focus groups included 45 peer mentors from the second and third grades (ages 17 and 18), which would make the mentors just 1-2 years older than the new students. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were conducted in the schools.

Analyses

The analysis of the qualitative data was theory driven, involving a search for meaning units related to PYD using the six Cs as the categories and dimensions. This procedure is a hybrid analysis combining techniques of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). More precisely, we applied the six Cs as themes in the deductive thematic analysis while allowing for themes to emerge directly from the data using inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The following steps were then applied. First, the interview transcripts were read and re-read to gather a basic impression of the data. The formal analysis began with a breakdown of the informants' responses into thematic themes or units of analysis or meaning units (e.g., experiences of being a peer mentor). This step followed an inductive approach. Second, having identified meaning units in each interview, the next step involved a deductive thematic analytical process of interpreting each interview and the meaning units identified in relation to the six Cs in the theory. Third, the Cs were then combined in relation to those to which they seemed most connected in the data. Fourth, differences and similarities were discussed at each step of the analysis to ensure common understanding and valid interpretations.

Results

Overall, many positive experiences emerged from stories about the peer mentors' perceptions of their role as a mentor, and their experiences of learning and developing as a person. The analysis also revealed that the Cs are intertwined, and that some Cs seem more closely connected to each other in the peer mentors' experiences than others. The results are thus presented as four subthemes: competence and character, caring and connection, and confidence and contribution as separate subthemes.

Competence and Character

In the interviews, the peer mentors spoke of learning much about being a mentor, in areas such as taking responsibility, showing respect for and being aware of others. One peer mentor talked about experiences in a manner that showed that he had become aware of his responsibility:

> Ehm, because it's good to say, 'I'm a peer mentor and I have … responsibility for people doing well.'

Learning to respect people for their differences was another theme:

> You are also learning a lot about yourself as a peer mentor. You gain a little more respect for everybody … for who they are.

Almost all of the peer mentors mentioned that they had learned more about how to talk to others with respect:

> I have learned how to talk to different types of people (…) We are not all the same. You cannot talk … in the same way to everyone.

Peer mentors recounted becoming more aware of the well-being of others. Several stated that this was their first thought when asked about what they had learned from being a student mentor. The following quote can be seen as being related to caring:

> The first thing that comes to my mind is really to see everyone.

Caring and Connection

Promoting well-being among students came across in all the interviews as an important task. Peer mentors described the activities they conducted in the classroom and at school as trying to ensure that everyone would have a good time and thrive. One reported that he was keen to be there to make others feel comfortable:

> Make people feel comfortable at school; they should not feel like outsiders or something.

Several mentors were concerned that the students who arrived at school should feel safe, and it was their responsibility to contribute to this:

> It's very rewarding and there's something about it … helping to create a safe environment. Because it's so crucial for both the learning environment and mental health that you have someone to be involved with and that you feel safe at school.

Across the interviews, the peer mentors also noted that they felt it was important for mentors and students to be about the same age, which could make it easier for the students to talk to them about any difficulties:

> And then there was also something slightly like that … As if it was difficult to say something to an adult then. Someone was a little closer … closer to yourself, a person who was easier to talk to.

The peer mentors felt that they could easily recognize who might need some extra care in class:

> … maybe to notice all … Because we are in that environment, in a way … the teenage environment, and we know what it's like and seeing the person when we

> go into a classroom. You are very likely to see who gets a lot of attention and stands out very well, and those who might be sitting in a corner are a bit quieter. I think that as a peer mentor we see it a little better than the teachers.

Related to the peer mentors' efforts to make students feel safe and secure is the feeling of connection to others and to the school. The peer mentors' perception of contributing to the psychosocial environment also concerns making contact with and approaching students. Several described being aware that students who often sat alone should have somebody to whom they could talk. Another important objective for mentors was to ensure that students felt a connection to their class:

> When we came in, we started to split them up a bit, and put them together with people they did not know … and so on, [the cliques] were completely broken up. So that class is really just one big group now … all together.

Confidence

The peer mentors found that being a mentor had given them more confidence, especially as they were challenged to plan and lead activities for the class and the school:

> Peer mentoring has positively influenced my ability to lead others.

It was also claimed that the training they received gave them confidence in their own abilities:

> Being a peer mentor has given me enough knowledge and competence to teach new student mentors.

Contribution

In PYD, contribution or participation can be both input and outcome. The peer mentors' experiences of participation in school provided an opportunity to influence the psychosocial environment and become role models at school. However, their contribution and influence were mostly related to the choice and content of activities. At the same time, several peer

mentors expressed the view that they lacked the authority to make meaningful changes. Some said that suggestions for changes were not always passed on to the authorities or leaders of the schools, giving a feeling of tokenism.

There were also other challenges in the work of being a mentor, such as a lack of understanding from other students. One peer mentor believed that "people" actually wondered what a peer mentor was. Another mentioned how their mentor class "looked at us strangely" when they presented themselves as peer mentors. Other challenges reported involved dealing with students who did not dare to interact with others or had difficulty speaking with them.

Peer mentors talked about how time and communication could be a barrier to their work as mentors. The lack of time with their mentor class was central, and this could partly be attributable to having different days for internships[1] or different hours for examinations. Some peer mentors found it challenging that the time they had with the mentor class was too short to do what they wanted, which was to contribute more. Time was also required for co-ordinating meetings. However, it appeared from the interviews that the peer mentors considered meetings with the resource group and other student units to be too infrequent:

> We try to make these arrangements, so it is sometimes incredibly difficult to find a date when everyone is at school.
>
> For my part, at least, there has been little time (…). We have often been in internships. Then we are at school once a week. And the hours we have then are quite important.

[1] During 2nd grade the students in the vocational programs are working outside school as part of their practical training.

Mentors stated very clearly that they experienced a lack of support, especially from the contact teacher of the mentor class. Many expressed a wish to contribute more to their mentees and found that the contact teachers did not make good use of their potential:

> We discovered, when we were there last time, that there were very many things that, in a way, could work and develop in that class. But it did not seem like someone was taking note of our ideas ...Yes, and so, the teachers should be a bit more engaged in relation to, like, inviting us, maybe. (…) Because then, it's a bit more like that, um … especially in a class with a lot of challenges and such things, you do not necessarily feel very welcome. (…) then it would have been easier if, like … the contact teacher had contacted us then.

In collaboration with the contact teacher, the peer mentors also found that teachers took over the management of the Dream Class, and they reported not being allowed to lead the Dream Class as they wanted:

> It doesn't really work out, as she [the teacher] really cares about this and she takes control and … doesn't let us do it our way.

In summary, the peer mentors experienced positive feelings while contributing to their fellow students and to the school environment. However, there were also some doubts regarding their feeling of being seen as important contributors by other stakeholders such as the teachers, which gives rise to concerns about how to make use of students as contributors in school. Overall, the use of peer mentors is well supported by research and should be seen as an important contribution to PYD, both for the mentors themselves and for the other students in school. Nevertheless, evaluation of the peer mentor role emphasizes that it is crucial that all involved support them and see them as a resource to avoid the feeling of tokenism.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

Empowering young people is important for several reasons (Mellanby, Rees, & Tripp, 2000). From a life-course perspective, basic conditions for children and youth will influence their health, living conditions and societal participation at later stages in their lives. Societies in the EU are facing a number of major challenges in health and well-being: an increasing chronic disease burden (World Health Organization, 2013, 2014; Wittchen et al., 2011), immigration issues, major consequences in employment and education[2] and overall an aging population. In addition, the evidence for climate change is believed to be unequivocal (Xun, Khan, Michael, & Vineis, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012), and this has profound health consequences. Children growing up today will be more exposed to the negative aspects of the environments than today's adults. Currently, children represent 20% of the population in the EU; by 2050, this will fall to 15%. Correspondingly, population growth in Norway in 2016 was calculated to be only 0.83%. This is the second year in a row that population growth has slowed; the last year in which growth was comparably weak was 2006 (Statistics Norway, 2018b). Thus, it is immensely important to decrease marginalization and feelings of despair to foster a robust and healthy generation that is ready to meet societal health challenges.

Public expenditure to mitigate the effects of adverse development and facilitate positive development at an early age will be much more effective than attempting to manage the consequences of childhood poverty or poor health later in life. The inability of large groups of children to achieve their full potential because they lack mental, physical or social well-being will lead to losses that societies cannot afford and must concern practitioners and policy makers. Internationally, the 2016 European Framework for Action on Mental Health and

Well-being may be considered a response to this development. The framework emphasizes the importance of empowering young people, fostering social inclusion and developing their active citizenship. In addition, there is a need to include young people in research on targeted interventions designed to meet the developmental needs of young people. Ozer and Douglas (2015) argue that youth participatory action research (YPAR) represents a promising approach to integrate youth expertise, engagement and empowerment into efforts to increase adolescents' health and well-being. YPAR also allows adults to learn from and with young people about important developmental phenomena that can be difficult for researchers to access. Similarly, Griebler et al. (2017) support the involvement of students in planning, implementing and evaluating health promotion efforts, and giving youth a voice in any research.

Conclusion

Students who feel empowered to influence and participate in decision-making in school are likely to develop a stronger intrinsic motivation for attending school, which may positively influence their academic achievement and their overall well-being (Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009), as well as success in later life. Student participation is not merely a requirement according to the National Education Act (2017), but also a goal in itself, as the development of autonomy and self-efficacy is key to education and training. An important task for schools is to prepare students for their future roles of asserting and practising active citizenship (Bruun Jensen & Simovska, 2005; Larson, 2000; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). Thus, the use of PYD programs such as the Dream School program to foster participation and develop resources at school is an important step towards meeting future challenges.

By applying the logic model of PYD to the Dream School intervention in upper secondary schools in Norway, this chapter has presented the theoretical reasoning based on

the five and six Cs, as well as the positive empirical impact and challenges of involving youths as peer mentors. However, empowering students (and peer mentors) implies that the invigilators have the willingness to yield control and facilitate real participation. As the Dream School intervention demonstrates, it can be difficult for adults to surrender control, and the school setting is largely controlled by adults. Research shows that if students are allowed to participate and influence their own environment, there are many gains. Consistent with our findings, Griebler et al. (2017) and Holsen et al. (2014) highlighted the need for teacher support and guidance for student participation to have a positive influence on other students. However, seeing students as genuine resources requires that we move beyond tokenism and allow for real influence. Developing students' skills in active and influential participation in everyday life is important for understanding democracy and contributing as active citizens to society in the future.

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