Community of Practice at a Specially Planned Youth Education School in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Access to learning facilities is essential for young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in their transition to adulthood. Participation in education can enhance social participation and belonging and contribute to the formation and negotiation of identities and competencies. This paper examines how special needs youth education contributes to bringing young people with ID into a position as learning social participants and how their identities are formed and negotiated through belonging to the school's community of practice. The study was informed by a social theory of learning and designed as a single case study carried out at a specially planned youth education school (SPYES) in Denmark. The study shows how social participation and forming identity can be developed through a trustful and recognising teacher–student relationship, an inclusive classroom setting where individual considerations are taken, shared practice regarding leisure activities with peers, and access to an individually adapted internship at workplaces outside the school.

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INTRODUCTION

Young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) or other cognitive impairments are vulnerable to exclusionary mechanisms in many areas of society (Lid 2015; MacIntyre 2014; World Health Organisation 2011). The Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities declares that the 'States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to…[among others] enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society' (Article 24, C, UN 2007). However, it is still difficult for young people with ID to gain access to higher education and lifelong learning. Many have difficulty obtaining an officially recognised diploma from the mainstream secondary school system and joining the ordinary higher education system and the labour market (Fryd 2011: 5).

In recent years, most research has dealt with inclusion in mainstream schools as a path to the education and development of young people with disabilities (Engsig & Johnstone 2015; Hansen et al. 2018; Hansen et al. 2020). However, a certain proportion of these young people in Denmark still participate in education via special schools. In Denmark, special school services provide an opportunity for young people with ID to participate in special needs education after secondary school. The official objective of these educational facilities is to provide learning that enhances personal development, well-being, and qualifications in young people's transition to adulthood (Promulgation of the Act on Youth Education for Young People with Special Needs). Therefore, the learning facilities at these special schools are highly relevant as a source of reflection on how young people with special needs can develop their identities, abilities, and opportunities for participation in the community of practice at the school.

Research into special education and special education schools has traditionally focused on educational methods, special educators' didactical teaching methods, professional issues, and special educators' relationship with the students' parents or families (Nilholm 2006, 2007). In recent years, we have seen a growing interest in the position of special education facilities as institutions for the development of students' social skills (Davies et al. 2015; Garrels 2019), social participation (Alexandersson 2011), and self-determination (Sagen & Ytterhus 2014; Tideman et al. 2022). There seems to be a growing interest in how the learning facilities in these schools can support the development of young people with disabilities' opportunities for participation in society. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate further what special needs education offers, such as Denmark's specially planned youth education school (SPYES). Additionally, this topic has undergone very little research in Denmark and the Nordic countries (Björk-Åman et al. 2021).

On this basis, we believe we need to develop our understanding of special needs education facilities and special educators' role in developing students' social participation and identities. In this paper, we answer the overall research question: how does special needs youth education contribute to bringing young people into a position as learning social participants in the schools' community of practice?

We shed light on this issue by breaking down the question as follows:

(1) How do young people enrolled in special needs education experience opportunities for participation in the school community of practice?

(2) How do special educators support young people at the school to become participating members of the school community of practice?

THE CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The contextual framework for this paper is SPYES in Denmark. SPYES is for young people under the age of 25 who are unable to complete mainstream secondary education. SPYES was established in 2007 to equalise educational opportunities for young people with learning disabilities and other special needs. In Denmark, young people with special needs have a legal right to receive an individually adapted secondary education; it is formative but does not formally qualify them for higher education or later occupations.

The purpose of specially planned youth education is for young people to gain personal, social, and professional competencies to develop independence and active participation in adulthood

and '[opportunities] for further education and employment' (§ 1 in The Danish Consolidation Act on Youth Education for Young People with Special Needs 2019).

Specially planned education consists of elements of teaching and practical activities and can include internships in private companies and public workplaces. The aim is to 1) promote young people's personal development and provide opportunities to participate independently and actively in community life, 2) promote young people's abilities to engage in social contexts and to have an independent and active social life, and 3) develop young people's competencies in educational or employment situations. Further, internships in companies and public workplaces aim to provide young people with work experience and other experience, ensuring qualifications relevant to the labour market, to develop personal skills and experience with work and cooperation necessary to achieve a stronger connection with the labour market, to participate in active adulthood and to give insight into the structure and working conditions of a workplace (Danish Consolidation Act on Youth Education for Young People with Special Needs 2019). Research on Danish SPYES is minimal. SPYES was evaluated in 2017 by a consultant house focusing on the outcomes of SPYES in accordance with statutory obligations (EPINION 2017). Gustafson and Mørck (2013) have studied students with autism and their learning processes in the community of a SPYES, and Ishøi et al. (2020) have studied the enhancement of student's well-being through activities in nature. There is a need for more research about SPYESs and their role in bringing young people with special needs into a position as learning social participants in school communities of practice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study is informed by the social theory of learning, as represented by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). Through their understanding of learning as social participation, we focus our study on young people's and special educators' perspectives on youth participation in SPYES and how they get into the position as learning social participants in the school community of practice.

> 'A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of the practice, its power relation, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning.' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 98)

Thus, a community of practice is a situated sociality (i.e. a group of people who, by virtue of their profession or similar, share a particular way of doing or performing something). Thus, the members share a practice that can be described as community-constitutive. Hence, a community of practice is not determined by external conditions but by something we do and create together (Moesby-Jensen 2012).

Participation refers to an encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. The focus is on learning as participation in various everyday practices (where education is just one factor) as a combined process of identity formation and opinion negotiation (Larsen et al. 2016: 114; Wenger 1998). According to Wenger (1998), learning is an integral part of the social practice that occurs in the social world and thus in everyday life interactions. Learning is a dynamic and non-individualistic phenomenon and is not primarily about individual cognitive information processing but about individuals' participation in communities and developing meaning and identity in close interaction with the environment (Wenger 1998). Furthermore, situated social learning contributes to 'self-knowledge that enables individuals to develop a sense of empowerment to participate as equal citizens' (Wenger 1998, cited in Bladt & Percy-Smith 2021: 277). Thus, Wenger points to the fact that education is more than a 'key to social and economic well-being' (Wenger 1998, as cited in Bladt & Percy-Smith 2021: 277); it is also about development and the processes of development, as any learning event is also an event that leaves the learner changed (Moesby-Jensen 2012: 41). Thus, this theory helps answer

our research question with a focus on how SPYES contribute to bringing young people into a position as learning social participants in a community of practice.

METHODOLOGY

Since research on SPYES is very limited, the study was designed as a qualitative explorative and descriptive single-case study (Yin 2003) involving participant observation (Spradley 2016) and qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015).

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Purposeful sampling (Creswell & Clark 2011) was applied to individuals who were students, teachers, or managers at a specific SPYES. Inclusion criteria were individuals who were especially experienced regarding the students' school participation opportunities. The teachers and the managers were knowledgeable about how teachers support students in participating in different life and school settings, developing opportunities for social participation, identity formation and negotiation. Participants were recruited through a professional contact, who gave us contact information to the manager of the school, who was then contacted through a written request containing information about the study. The manager then helped us recruit the seven other participants. The researchers did not have any previous relationship with the school.

SETTING

One SPYES located in a rural area outside the capital of Copenhagen was included as the setting for the study. The school is situated on a large piece of land and includes a car workshop, a wood workshop, an art workshop, a packing house, a plant nursery, a kitchen workshop, and classroom facilities. Furthermore, the school has horses, sheep, pigs, and rabbits. The school categorises the students as 'persons with special needs' and describes students' special needs as being caused by their mental and/or cognitive impairments. The school mentions on its webpage that many of the students have developmental and personality disorders or psychiatric problems, including autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and anxiety. The school is part of a large institution that, in addition to educational services, provides housing services and other services for young people with special needs who are between 15 and 30 years old. Approximately 40 young people are enrolled in the school, and 40 staff members are employed.

PARTICIPANTS

There were eight key informants. These were two teachers, two managers and four students. Two students lived at the school, and two lived with their parents. See Table 1 for sample demographics.

Table 1 Sample demographics.

NAME	TITLE	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE
Maria	Student	Female	25	Third-year student – went to special needs primary school at some time in her life
Nina	Student	Female	19	First-year student – went to special needs primary school at some time in her life
Peter	Student	Male	19	First-year student – went to special needs primary school at some time in his life
John	Student	Male	20	First-year student – went to special needs primary school at some time in his life
Anne	Teacher	Female	Sixties	Teacher – worked at the school for approximately 17 years
June	Teacher	Female	Fifties	Teacher – worked at the school for approximately four years
Charlotte	Manager	Female	Forties	Social worker and a master's degree holder – worked at the school for approximately four years
Tina	Manager	Female	Fifties	Pedagogue and a master's degree holder – worked at the school for approximately four and a half years

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Desk research

The researchers conducted desk research, collecting data from the school's Facebook page and website. This was to gain knowledge about the school and its activities.

Observation

Participant observation was conducted to gain insights into the everyday interactions at the school. The observation at the school took place over five full days and three half days from August 2019 to March 2020. COVID-19 pandemic had no impact on the study since the study was done just before the restriction was initiated. Most of the participant observations were performed over one-and-a-half months in a specific course that the four key students attended, which was taught by the two key teachers. This course, 'Youth Life', was an elective course that focused on the students' knowledge, understanding and insights concerning general education-related themes, such as citizenship, identity, and awareness regarding the global situation. The observer was present in the lessons, breaks and eating situations, changing between participant and a non-participant. An observation guide helped focus on the participation and their negotiation of identity in the lessons and outside the course (Spradley 2016). The field notes were written during the day, and in small breaks in the form of memos, as well as after each school day. These were descriptive, reflective, and methodological. However, the focus was on interactional processes of everyday activities writing about what happened, when, between whom, in which contexts (Emerson et al. 1995). The scope of the notes was approximately 16 A4 pages and 40 A5 pages.

Qualitative interviews

Three face-to-face dyadic interviews were conducted. Two of them were with the two managers and the third was with the two key teachers. The dyadic interview was chosen to get a broader and deeper understanding by including two individuals' versions of social interaction at the school and combining and integrating these (Eisikovits & Koren 2010). The interviews with the managers were unstructured. The purpose was to learn about the students and social interaction at the school. These lasted one and a half hours each. The dyadic interviews with the teachers were done to reach an understanding of how the teachers addressed their everyday practice and pedagogical approach to the students especially with attention to the students' social participation. This lasted approximately one hour and were semi-structured (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015).

There were also conducted two face-to-face group interviews (Morgan 1997) with the four key students. The purpose of these was to capture their social school experiences at the SPYES. They lasted approximately two hours each and were also semi-structured. The group interview was done to collect perspective from multiple youth as well as gaining insight into their social interaction. At these interviews the two key teachers were present to provide support and comfort for the students. Further, their presence also gave an opportunity to observe the teachers' roles and interaction. All interviews took place at the school during school hours.

During all the interviews, the interviewer took descriptive as well as reflective notes (Spradley 2016). The notes were written directly onto the copies of the interview guides and elaborated on directly afterwards. The disadvantage of taking notes during interviews is that it can lead to inaccurate data since nuances and details may be lost. We considered if it would have been preferable to have the interviews recorded. This would have provided the informants' precise wording. However, we assessed that a triangulation of methods would strengthen the internal and external validity. This was done by using the different informants to confirm the information from the other informants. Further, using the notes from the participant observations and unstructured conversations it was possible to nuance data from the interviews.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

To meet ethical research standards, the school and the participants have been anonymised, and all participants have been informed about the research purpose, content, and confidentiality (Dalton & McVilly). The study was introduced in straightforward, simple, and clear language (e.g. plain and concrete) to the students and all participants gave oral consent (Freedman 2001). The teachers were involved in improving the appropriateness of the group interviews with the students, and the methods and interview setting were discussed with them (Morris 2003). The teachers played an important role in informing, preparing, and supporting the students during participation in the group interviews and in ensuring clarity and predictability when the first author conducted these and the participant observations. The aim was to secure a context

that allowed the students to share their perspectives as comfortably, freely and in the least stressful setting possible. Thus, the ethical considerations in this study were significantly linked to the students' preparation and support of the students during their social interaction with the researcher. However, alongside this is the issue of power dynamics between the students and the teachers. Thus, there may have been an unintended dependency relationship between students and the teachers that may have influenced the students' statements. Nonetheless, the students' responses during the interview were validated during the participant observation and thus were assessed as authentically theirs.

DATA ANALYSIS

The field notes and notes from the interviews represent the data used in the paper and were analysed using an initial coding process. The transformation process from raw data to findings took place by sorting data items into categories and involved collaboration between the first and second authors to validate the categories (Lofland et al. 2006: 195). Thus, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify prominent themes and general patterns (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015). This resulted in four empirical topics: 1) The importance of the teacher–student relationship, 2) Enhancing social participation in the classroom and leisure activities, 3) Enhancing social participation with peers, and 4) Learning through social participation in community life. The final step of the analysis has been discussing them using theory.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present an analysis in which the empirical findings are discussed through the theoretical lens of social learning theory.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

This section illustrates how the relationship between the teachers and the students plays a pivotal role in young people's formation of identity and how the teachers' support for the students' participation in formal and informal school activities, as well as activities outside school hours, was an important part of this.

Personal contact person

All the students had a personal contact person. This teacher supported the students' participation in the different activities at the school and their interactions with people and communities outside the school. This contact person helped the students interact and communicate with their statutory caseworker, schoolmates, friends, or others. The students' stories about their relationship with their contact person and the observation of their interactions revealed a close and trusting relationship between the two. Hence, it was clear that the students valued this relationship and perceived the contact person as very helpful. One expressed this by describing her contact person as 'more than just a contact person'. Another explained, 'You can speak to your contact person if there is a conflict. You can just go and talk to them. You can talk to them about anything. When you are feeling down or when you feel good.'. A third confirmed this by saying, 'If you are having a hard time, then you will feel better when you have talked to your mentor.'.

Regarding the relationship between the teachers and the students at a more general level, many of the students expressed that 'the teachers engage themselves and they understand you', 'support you' and 'teachers are not afraid of revealing how they feel… you get a connection to the teachers, and this makes it easier to share how you are feeling'. It was revealed that many of the observed conversations between the students and the teachers reached beyond the educational or professional elements of the school. A statement made by one of the students illustrates this: 'It is not only at the school they help.'. The participant observer also witnessed conversations outside of educational issues, such as conversations on the students' ways of collaborating with their statutory caseworker or their relationship with their family or boyfriend/girlfriend. Several of the young people explicitly said that they found it very positive that they 'could talk about everything' and 'talk privately and intimately' with their teachers.

The findings suggested that the students experienced emotional recognition from the staff and that they valued the emotional recognition as well as their helpful, open, and positive way of engaging and interacting with them. This made the students feel seen, heard, and understood. This can be said to enable students to develop positive relationships by being recognised as legitimate subjects. This form of recognition leads to self-confidence, allowing the students to act, communicate, and participate in the school community. According to Honneth (2006: 146), this experience develops the individual's basic self-confidence. Furthermore, Honneth (2006) argued that recognition supports an individual in obtaining a meaningful life in which the person can develop and use their resources. Thus, the emotional recognition that the professionals portrayed can be interpreted as central to the students' well-being in their everyday lives at school.

Humour, identity formation and negotiation

At school, there was a positive atmosphere. This was evident, for example, in how the students had fun with each other and with the teachers. The students also explicitly mentioned this positive vibe when they talked about their teachers. Some students said, 'You can make pranks and have fun, and the teachers are part of it' and 'You can laugh and smile. The teachers are not just a teacher.'. They appreciated the experience of being able to 'have fun with the teachers'.

Humour and friendly teasing played a significant role in the interactions at school, both among the students and among teachers and students. Several school days started with the students from the 'Youth Life' class barricading the door to the classroom with pillows, whiteboards on wheels, and chairs and then hiding around the building's first floor. The teachers then went looking for them while they said aloud, with pretend indignation and surprise in their voices: 'What has happened here?'. While the teachers searched for the students, they would ask them to 'say something', making the students say '*couk couk*'. When the teachers found the students, the students would laugh and whine with excitement.

These episodes illustrate how young people form and negotiate an identity as students who can make pranks and challenge the teachers' authority. Through these identity negotiations, they are given the opportunity to 'take power in the classroom', gain a voice and create an identity (like other young people) that rebels against authority (the teacher). Furthermore, the example illustrates how the teachers tackled this situation – not through scolding but humour. The earlier mentioned study by Ishøi et al. (2020) also showed that the students experienced that the staff created a safe context and that they contributed with humour and joy during the activities.

The students' participation in the practical everyday life of the school and their engagement in relationships with their fellow students and staff became a part of the social learning process, which is part of the students' negotiations of who they are. According to Wenger (1998):

> 'identity is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other. As we encounter our effects on the world and develop our relations with others, these layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections.' (151).

ENHANCING SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES

It was repeatedly observed that the teachers supported the students' social participation in the school's community of practice through an individual, specialised, and appreciative approach to each student. The teachers emphasised that this approach was crucial to 'keep them [the young people] at the school even though many of them have had bad school experiences'.

Classroom teaching

The elective course 'Youth Life' took place twice a week from 8.30 am to 2 pm and was scheduled with three classes before lunch and an obligatory one-hour nature walk after lunch. According to the two teachers on the course, this daily schedule could only be completed if the teaching and activities were closely related to the individual students' needs, abilities, and

resources on that particular day. Observations confirmed this, and it became clear that the teachers constantly adapted the teaching situation for each student to support the students' opportunities to participate in the course and the community. This, for instance, involved letting one student do crafts while everyone watched and discussed the daily news programme. This allowed for meeting a student's need to keep his hands occupied to prevent anxiety during class. This student was also permitted to sit in an armchair and sleep during class discussions when needed. A different student was allowed to sit at his table on days when his mental condition did not allow him to sit with the other students. It also included having sudden one-to-one conversations with a single student, if needed. The teachers expressed how individual and special considerations are crucial to enabling students' participation, both in the school's activities and in the social life of the school community of practice. The teachers reported that even though they find their work rewarding and meaningful, this practice is emotionally draining. They also describe how they support each other during class by taking turns involving, managing, and keeping the discussions and conversations going with the students.

During the course, the teachers constantly made room for the students to bring up urgent issues, considerations, and worries. They achieved a balance between including the students' personal issues and experiences in the group discussions and simultaneously carrying out the planned activities for the group.

Furthermore, the teachers used the group dynamic to develop the students' professional, personal, and social skills. They described how this was attained by involving the students in each other's problem-solving processes. This was done by including the students' different experiences and using them to talk about a given student's personal situation. In this way, the students learned how to handle conflicts through peer input.

An example of this, from the observation, was when one of the students – Peter – spoke about how he had fallen out with another student who had 'slander[ed] him to everyone'. One of the teachers followed up on this by posing several clarification questions and they reached the conclusion that 'it is probably not everyone at the school' that had heard the other student talking about Peter behind his back and that Peter did not know what the other student had said. The teachers tried to clarify what had happened. The core of the conflict turned out to be that Peter's best friend cancelled an appointment at the weekend, and from there, the conflict escalated. Peter explained, 'I feel that he has let me down.' He continued by saying that he was annoyed and sad when his friend had cancelled. It was clear that Peter was very upset by the situation and needed to talk about how to handle it. Both the teachers and the other students participated in the conversation. The teachers posed open, detailed, and constructive questions to Peter: 'How do you think the situation has affected Ali?', 'How can you speak with him about it?' and 'When do you want to discuss the matter with him?'. Furthermore, the teachers stated how they would handle the situation if they had a fallout with a friend, and they shared their assessment of Peter's friend Ali by describing him as a good friend who did not want to harm anyone on purpose. In addition, the teachers invited the two other students present to reflect on what Peter should do. The other students offered suggestions on how Peter should handle the conflict. After 45 minutes, Peter no longer wanted to discuss the situation, and they moved on to the day's programme.

This situation illustrates how the teachers actively use the student's personal experiences to talk about general themes, for instance, conflict management. There were numerous situations during the fieldwork when the teachers generalised the students' problems to create learning. For instance, including a student's testimonials about grief over the loss of close family members or debating the issue of unwanted contact on social media in group discussions. Thus, the study shows how the teachers interacted with the students in a way that supported the students' identities as individuals who can ask for help, as well as give advice and help to others. Furthermore, the study shows how the physical framework of the course 'Youth Life' and the joint activity in this, as well as with other students outside this course, promote the participants' sense of belonging, which is an essential aspect of participation in a learning community (Wenger 1998). Through the teachers' support for engaging in social participation, the students were recognised as legitimate members of the school community of practice.

Leisure activities – in the intersecting between peers and civic society

The school supports students in activities outside of school hours, for instance, in civil society. An example is that four times a year, the staff take the students to a large city nearby to a disco, which opens exclusively for people with special needs. One of the teachers reported that this activity is part of the school's emphasis on supporting active citizenship. In this way, the school enhances the students' identities as people who participate in an activity that is considered a norm by young people and society. It also provides a way for the students to party in a safe environment. The example also illustrates how the school chooses to participate in an event that supports participation with other young people with special needs and, to some degree, safeguards the students from partying with young people outside the community of SPYES.

Another example was described by one of the managers at the school, who explained how she had invited some of the students to her local football club to see a football match in which the students sat together with the local supporters. Her motivation for this initiative was to allow the students to experience being part of a community of practice outside the school. She said, 'When we detect that the students don't have the same opportunities as other young people, then we want them to have these too. Citizenship is a key element for the school.' The school further enhanced the students' participation in leisure activities by arranging net parties outside school hours, organising communal dining, and lending out the green areas at the school to the students for them to train their rabbits. These activities outside of formal school hours give students a chance to interact and develop their social skills and identities.

ENHANCING SOCIAL PARTICIPATION WITH PEERS

It was clear that the student's interactions with each other also played a pivotal role in their participation in educational and social activities at and outside the school. Several students explicitly stated that the good thing about attending school was that they made friends. They said, 'It is a school where you can always make friends.', 'It is a fantastic school where everybody is nice and nobody bullies you.' and 'You get support and understanding from everybody if you are having a hard time.'. Friendships between the students can be characterised as close and intimate because they shared personal and vulnerable thoughts and experiences and cared for each other. Many students also interacted outside the school by, for instance, going to the mall and nightclubs in the city centre or visiting other students at their homes. Some of them also went on holidays together. They also connected frequently online on Facebook, Messenger, Decort and other online platforms. One teacher said, 'Regarding their digital life, they all connect online with each other and about each other.'.

Intimate friendships were also evident in the openness and trust students showed towards each other in and outside class. It was common for the students to share their personal thoughts and experiences during class. One of many examples of this was when one of the students cheerfully told the other three students and the teachers during their round table discussion that she had good news: 'I don't have to see my shrink anymore because it is going much better with my anxiety. I still get medication, but I haven't had an anxiety attack for six months.'. The other students reacted with reassuring and empathetic expressions. It was common that there was great acceptance of each other among the students. The students also explicitly expressed this. For instance, they said, 'You can be who you are.' and 'If you are feeling down, everybody supports you and shows consideration.'.

The students' experiences of friendships and recognition from their peers can be interpreted through Honneth's (2006) concept of social recognition. This refers to the situation where 'a person is recognised as a person', resulting in 'fundamental value for a specific community' (Høilund & Juul 2015: 28). A human being's self-respect and awareness is developed through social recognition since social appreciation gives the individual 'a possibility to relate to one's own characteristic and possibilities in a positive way' (Honneth 2006: 163) at the same time as having an identity as an appreciated member of a community. Thus, social recognition strengthens an individual's self-esteem (ibid.). The students' positive experience of becoming a legitimate member of the community at the school, the feeling of a sense of belonging, and the forming of friendships have also been highlighted in three other studies about special needs education (Gustafson & Mørck, 2013; Ishøi et al. 2020; The Municipality of Aabenraa, 2015).

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The latter also concluded that a sense of belonging to a learning community positively affected students' well-being.

Thus, the study showed that the students valued their friendships at school. In light of Wenger and Lave's (1991) concept of a community of practice, this suggests that the students became a part of a community of practice that existed at the school and that through participation in this community of practice, they developed their personal and social competencies regarding social interaction and the development of friendships with their peers. The competencies were developed through the need to adapt to others, provide and receive help, resolve conflicts and start new relationships.

However, they also had conflicts, such as who should be romantically involved with whom. There was also conflict when a student pushed someone else's limits, for instance, by sending inappropriate text messages or when they did not stop physically poking someone, even though the person had said stop. When there were conflicts, the teachers played an important role in helping the students solve them.

LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY LIFE

The study illustrated how the students' participation in community life was supported by the school's structures and overall values in promoting active citizenship.

Development of identity through participation in the workplace

As part of the students' final and third year at the school, all of them participated in an individual adapted internship at a workplace or sheltered employment in a community setting outside the school. One of the students recalled that her internship at a local nursing home for older people had been great. Another talked about her experience as a trainee in a flower shop and how she liked the job assignments but felt uncomfortable regarding the social aspect of the job because of the culture in which the staff talked about each other behind their backs. Hence, the school uses internships to form a view of what kind of employment would be relevant for the students after they leave school.

Through internships and other activities, the school has opportunities to work systematically to prepare a resource profile of the students, which is important in the transition from SPYES to employment, sheltered employment, or other kinds of social activities. The different types of workshops at the school and the internship and volunteer work in the community are used to 'test the young people's endurance, perseverance, meeting stability and clarify how they oversee the work process' (teacher).

Wenger's (1998: 112) concept of boundary encounters between members of different communities, for instance, the students from the school and public and private companies/organisations and non-governmental organisations, sheds light on how the school supported and balanced the students' opportunities to participate in community life. This was supported through internships in ordinary workplaces on special terms, which also developed the student's professional skills and competencies to develop independence and achieve active participation in adulthood. This aligns with the statutory framework outlined in 'The Contextual Framework' (above). However, the students' participation also introduced them to other repertoires (for instance, the repertoire used in a flower shop or nursing home). It gave them the opportunity to become part of a mutual enterprise and to build relationships with members of other communities of practice. The students' introduction to and participation in communities of practice outside the school might support their way to further (sheltered) employment or education. Thus, the study shows that social learning, which takes place at school through participation, supports students' citizenship and therefore becomes important in relation to their well-being and ability to navigate society. Thus, this study shows how school balances young people's participation among peers at school and outside school in different settings.

Forming identity through participation in voluntary work

The theme of citizenship is an integrated part of the school's professional curriculum, and they work on this theme explicitly five weeks a year with the students about different aspects – volunteer work being one of them. The school arranges for students to participate in different

kinds of voluntary work. An illustrative example is a project developed in close collaboration with a non-governmental organisation to raise money for orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya, Africa. The students' roles were to do gardening work, change car tires, bake and sell cakes, wash shelves in shops, and deliver flyers for companies. Through their work, the students collected approximately 38,000 Danish kroners, which they donated to the orphanage. The money was spent on building a vital security wall around the orphanage to protect the children from assault and kidnapping.

This is one example of how the school community contributes to enhancing the students' personal competencies through access to and participation in volunteer work, where the students form and negotiate their identities as volunteers. This social participation in society supports and enhances students' social image. Acknowledging the students as citizens who have something to contribute to society – nationally and internationally – further shows respect and contributes to making the students feel appreciated and accepted.

Development of a participant position in a socioeconomic sphere

The school has several workshops that collaborate with the local community. They have a packing plant where nuts and chia seeds are packed and sold to local stores. At the plant, the students do the packing and deliver the products to customers, together with the staff. The school also has a plant nursery, where the students cultivate plants and sell them to locals and others on a yearly garden day. The purpose and benefits of the plant nursery are explained by the staff in the local paper:

> 'In here, they learn something about how it is to be at a workplace. To show up on time and about customer service. When they experience the yearly flower day, it becomes very clear for them [the students] that someone else can use the plants they have grown from scratch.' (staff)

A student expressed his role during the yearly flower day: 'I have to help and take the flowers outside and just be helpful. I love to be here' (student). Another staff member reported, 'It is a very big motivational factor for the young people, that someone thinks that they did well and that they want to buy it [the flower] from us' (staff).

The work in the socioeconomic workshops is structured so that the students have opportunities to practice and develop concrete professional competencies that relate specifically to the workshop they work in. This gives the students some experience of what it is like to be part of a workplace, and during this process, they get respect and acceptance because other people appreciate their work. Hence, the study illustrates how the school is concerned with the goal of making the students as capable and independent as possible, which includes supporting the students' development of personal, social, and professional competencies through participation in the school community of practice as well as participation and interaction with people outside the school.

DISCUSSION

Wenger's (1998) thoughts on social learning and the community of practice make it apparent how the students' participation in the school's community of practice influences the students' learning and development of identity. In the community of practice, students form and negotiate their identities with members of the community. These negotiations were created through the ways in which meanings and their ability to negotiate become a part of who they are (Moesby-Jensen 2012:93). Thus, the creation and continuation of the community of practice are closely related to both the negotiation of students' identities and collective identity (Larsen et al. 2016: 115). The students developed identities as, for instance, a good friend, someone who gives and receives help and contributes to a working community through internships and activities in the socioeconomic enterprises at the school. In this way, the school community of practice mirrored social learning processes; in these processes, the teachers supported the students' work through continuous social interactions. Thus, this study adds to the understanding of how special needs education for young people contributes to bringing young people into a position as learning social participants in their communities of practice and how their identities are formed and negotiated through belonging to the communities of practice. A solid commitment

to social participation, recognition, and equalisation of opportunities for young people with disabilities seems to be an enabling factor in shaping an educational environment for learning, belonging, and forming identity in their transition to adulthood. The study also points to how the teachers' relational competencies were essential for developing this learning environment, which aligns with previous research in the field (Aspelin et al. 2020). The findings suggest that schools can play a vital role in young people's social development process and create a learning space for them, where they form and negotiate their identities, develop friendships, try themselves in different social participants' positions, and get a glimpse of what life outside the school community of practice in, for example, workplaces can look like.

However, SPYES, as an institution, is not in line with the Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities' objective, according to which state parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning for people with disabilities, as they are a case of a segregated offer (Article 24, C, UN 2007). In Denmark, there is increased use of SPYES (and referral of children and young people to special schools or services). This raises questions about how these children's and young people's development processes can best be promoted and in which learning environments.

An important issue that has not been included in this study is the lack of opportunities for participation. Furthermore, our study does not disclose knowledge about how these students cope with environments outside the school, for example, workplaces, during their internships. Research is needed to shed light on young people's transition from special needs education to everyday life outside these facilities to establish how special needs education contributes to this process.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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