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Generation Connections in Outside School Hours Care: Children's Perspectives

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Abstract: Age segregation is a significant social issue in Australia and intergenerational programs have been considered as an effective intervention to meet the needs of children and older adults. Both older community members and children are presenting unmet needs that require innovative and cost-effective care solutions. This paper focusses on the perspectives of children who participated in a series of intergenerational programs coordinated by an Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) service. Semi-structured interviews called Taking Circles were used to gather the children's ideas and to use their perspectives for program design and innovation. The transcripts of the Talking Circles and field observations were thematically analysed. The children reported positive experiences and genuine connections developed between older adults in their community and themselves. This study is the first Australian research to explore children's perspectives of intergenerational programs facilitated in OSHC settings.

Keywords: intergenerational program, children's participation, child-centred approach, outside school hours care service, extended education

Introduction

Generational segregation is becoming a significant social issue in western societies due to increased family mobility, aging population (Campbell et al., 2023) and agism beliefs (Cummings et al., 2004). A lack of meaningful intergenerational contact can negatively impact both older and younger people, affecting their mental health, social well-being, and perceptions of each other (Zhong et al., 2020). Questions may be raised about the opportunities that children are having to interact with grandparents and older people from their community.

An Australian Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) provider intentionally planned and implemented intergenerational programs complementary to their holiday care programs to strengthen community bonds between school-aged children and older residents in the community. The program known as Generations Connection was developed for a twelve-month period undertaken concurrently at ten sites in New South Wales, Australia. The programs were facilitated by educators at each OSHC service. The programs were conducted at OSHC service venues or community locations such as residential aged care homes. The programs were conducted for three days in each school holiday period. They were evaluated to gain insights about the operationalising of these programs and to understand the social, economic,

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educational and workforce implications. This paper focusses on a component of the evaluation. It reports on the perspectives of the children from two of the OSHC services. The research question was – What are children’s experiences of intergenerational programs in OSHC services? The sub-question was – What would children like to see in future programs?

Background

In Australia, school age children are spending more time in formal care provision such as OSHC, which is a form of extended education. Some children spend time in informal care with their grandparents, with two in five grandparents providing some care to their grandchildren under the age of 13 years (AIFS, 2022). However, some grandparents are reporting having less opportunities to spend time with their grandchildren as substitute carers as the children get older (AIFS, 2022). These circumstances are impacting the interactions between children and older members in the community.

Intergenerational programs provide impetus for thinking about the policy approaches, pedagogy and practices for connecting school age children and older adults through OSHC services. The changing care arrangements and social demographics have altered interactions with extended family members for children of school age. There is the potential that both older adults and children have limited opportunities to connect, especially cross-generationally (Campbell et al., 2023; Jarrott, 2012; Kamei et al., 2021). Also, there has been increased use of OSHC services by children and families (AGDE, 2023). The increased attendance means that the opportunities provided by OSHC will influence the children’s development and have significant impact on their well-being (Simoncini et al., 2015). *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia 2.0* (AGDE, 2022) advocates for children to feel connected to the world around them (Outcome 2). Intergenerational programs have been considered as an effective intervention to give children and older persons opportunities to build relationships with each other.

Intergenerational programs

The history of the development of intergenerational programs began in communities, with varying initial intentions and approaches. Intergenerational programs refer to activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations. Intergenerational programs involve the “sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young” (Kaplan & Sanchez, 2014, p367). In England, a broader conceptualization was created as Intergenerational Practice:

An active process that aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contributes to building more cohesive communities. Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the younger and older have to offer and those around them (Beth Johnson Foundation, 2009).

Evaluation of intergenerational programs revealed positive outcomes. A trend started to emerge to indicate that intergenerational programs can have an impact on participants’ knowledge, skills and level of involvement in civic activities (Hanmore-Cawley & Scharf,

“I don’t want just to sit on a chair three hours”- Children’s experiences of daily life in school-age educare in Sweden

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to contribute knowledge about how children themselves experience their daily lives in Swedish School-Age Educare (SAEC) and how these experiences can be understood in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, which are the components of Antonovsky’s (1987) Sense of Coherence theory. To gain insight into children’s perspectives, a mosaic approach was applied, allowing children to draw and participate in group discussions. The study includes 60 children from five different SAECs. The data is analysed deductively, using the three SOC components as a framework. The results reveal that the components are interconnected and affect one another. Children highlight the importance of having opportunities to play and spend time with friends. In this, teachers play a vital role, not only in providing engaging activities but also in maintaining structure, which helps children make sense of their time at the SAEC. Furthermore, the study finds that strict routines and a lack of influence can lead children to perceive their time at the SAEC as less meaningful, making it difficult to understand why certain things are done in specific ways. By applying SOC theory, the study enhances knowledge of what children consider important, ultimately contributing to a stronger sense of coherence.

Key words: deductive analysis, everyday practices, children’s perspective, school-age educare, sense of coherence

Introduction

Research highlighting children’s experiences is limited, but previous studies have, for example, focused on their perspectives on what they like to in SAEC (Cartmel, et al., 2023; Hurst, 2023; Näpfli & Schweinberger, 2025), participation (Haglund, 2015; Simoncini, et al., 2015), wellbeing (Elvstrand, et al., 2025b), and their descriptions of teachers in SAEC (Lager, 2021).

Given the large number of children enrolled in SAEC in Sweden, it is essential to understand what they perceive as meaningful leisure time. In Sweden, nearly half a million children, 80% of children aged 6–12 years, attend SAEC both before and after school hours, as well as during school holidays (Skolverket, 2025). This makes SAEC a significant environment where children spend a considerable amount of time. SAEC is an integrated part of the Swedish school system and is governed by the national curriculum, in which a specific section, Part 4, explicitly regulates the educational mission of SAEC (Skolverket, 2024).

Over the past decades, a shift has occurred in SAEC, which Gustafsson Nyckel (2024) describes as a transition from a distinctly social pedagogical orientation towards an increasing

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emphasis on learning and teaching. According to the governing document for SAEC, the concept of teaching is to be understood in a broadened sense, encompassing the interplay between development, learning, and care (Skolverket, 2024). The curriculum highlights a number of specific areas that the SAEC is tasked with addressing, such as language and mathematics. Equally central, however, is its mission to foster democratic values and to support children's play. Children should therefore, in the SAEC centre, be given opportunities for learning as well as for engaging in meaningful leisure activities.

Furthermore, teaching should be grounded in the children's interests, needs, and experiences. This implies that children are to be granted substantial agency, not only in shaping the type of teaching they encounter but also in actively participating in the teaching situation itself. Despite the fact that the concept of teaching has been applied to SAEC for over fifteen years, research indicates that its meaning remains difficult to define (Elvstrand et al., 2024), which in turn has implications for the children involved. In other words, there exists a research gap that is important to address.

The overall aim of the study is to contribute to knowledge about children's everyday lives in SAEC and what they highlight as meaningful to them. Using a deductive analysis, this will be applied to Antonovsky's theory of Sense of Coherence. The study is based on the following overarching research question:

How can children's descriptions of their everyday experiences in the SAEC be understood in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness?

Given the study's focus on children's perspectives regarding meaningful experiences in SAEC, several stakeholders within the educational and child development sectors may benefit from its findings: educational practitioners and SAEC staff, policy makers, teacher education, and guardians.

Previous research

Children's perspectives on their time in SAEC have been explored by several researchers, each highlighting different aspects. Recurring factors that children identify as important for them both in Swedish and international studies is to experience a sense of meaning and well-being include opportunities for participation. Further, they highlight social relationships, voluntariness, and the presence of adults who are engaged and provide both time and space for structured and unstructured activities.

Lager and Gustafsson Nyckel (2022), in a field study, demonstrate how children's agency is crucial for perceiving their time in SAEC as meaningful. The study provides examples of how children exercise influence in relation to routines, time, and space, and socio-material conditions by acting in ways that allow them, for instance, to create and maintain relationships (e.g. Elvstrand et al., 2025a). When children feel that time lacks meaning, for example, when they have no one to spend time with or nothing to do, the time spent in the SAEC centre may primarily be experienced as waiting to go home (Hurst, 2017). Children's opportunities for agency and participation must also be understood in relation to the conditions of SAEC, including the physical learning environment and the organisation of time, which enable participation in various ways (Grewell, 2025).

Creating Safe, Engaging and Educational Spaces and Experiences for Disenfranchised Youth: Young People's Perspectives

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Abstract: Participation in extended education opportunities benefits development and learning. However, an increasing number of Australian children and young people are becoming disenfranchised from formal schooling and face access barriers to extended education offerings. In this article we present and discuss the voices of young people who participated in two early intervention programs aimed at promoting positive development and psycho-social-educational outcomes in disenfranchised youth. Their narratives demonstrate how relational, youth-centred, flexible and holistic engagement practices promote safety, trust and a sense of belonging. In the context of relational and environmental safety, participants engaged in experiences which foster development and learning and, thus, accessed their right to education. We discuss the findings drawing on trauma-informed practices, ecological systems theory and children's rights and highlight the importance of listening to children and young people and acting on what they have to say.

Keywords: Disenfranchised youth, educational engagement programs, children's rights, trauma-informed practice, ecological systems theory, children and young people's voices

Funding Statement

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Introduction

Participation in extended education opportunities such as outside school hours services, interest-based private tutoring, school-based extra-curricular activities or community-based courses or programs provides children and young people with a vast array of experiences to foster physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development (Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019; Sivan & Siu, 2017; Stecher, 2018). However, access to these educational spaces and activities is unequally distributed. Cost, age, transport and other eligibility criteria, such as regular school

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¹ Resolve: Australian Government Safer Communities Fund Early Intervention Grant Youth in Power: Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources' Safer Communities Fund

attendance, create barriers to taking advantage of extended education opportunities, in particular for school-aged children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and who have been disenfranchised from schooling (Bae et al., 2019; Bae & Stecher, 2019; O'Donnell & Redmond, 2021). This children's rights and social justice issue is of concern to children, young people, families and communities.

In this article, we bring together the perspectives of young people aged 10 to 17 on two programs aimed at engaging youth at risk of becoming disenfranchised from formal education. The first, *Resolve*, is an early intervention youth outreach, diversion and coaching program aimed at diverting young people from the criminal justice system and supporting their engagement in pro-social and personally meaningful activities. The second, *Youth in Power*, combined adventure-based group learning with intensive one-on-one mentoring to promote positive development in youth considered to be at risk of adverse psycho-social-educational outcomes. Both programs were piloted at approximately the same time by two leading community services organisations in one socially disadvantaged community in Southeast Queensland, Australia.

In our conversations with program participants, we aimed to find out:

1. What supported young people's sustained engagement in *Resolve* and *Youth in Power*.
2. How participants benefitted from the programs.
3. If young people encountered any challenges and had ideas for improving the programs.

This article is focused on the potential of the two programs for promoting positive development in disenfranchised youth through educational experiences. However, we advise that *Youth in Power* and *Resolve*, in particular, were more than conventional extended education opportunities. They aimed to address significant psycho-social-educational disadvantage and marginalisation, including homelessness, acculturation stress, substance use, youth crime and poor mental health. Including these programs in the discussion of extended education is an intentional effort to (re-)frame the field from a position of equity and social justice as outlined in the literature review and promulgated by Bae and Stecher (2019) specifically.

Literature Review

In recent years, educational discourse has been influenced by growing concerns about student disengagement from formal schooling in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2025), the Year 7 to Year 12 retention rate has declined steadily from 84.8% in 2017 to 79.9% in 2024, indicating that, currently, one in five young Australians leave school early. School attendance levels for Year 1 to Year 10 have also declined. The percentage of students with attendance at or above 90 per cent was 59.8% in 2024, down from 61.6% in 2023 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024). This too could be a factor in Year 12 retention rates.

Far from being universal, there are significant demographic variations in this trend. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the Year 7 to 12 retention rate is alarmingly low at 56.7%. Similarly, socio-economic status and residential area impact scholastic attainment. In 2021, 74% of students in low socioeconomic areas met the requirements of a Year 12 or

Children's Perspectives on Quality in Extended Education: Agency, Co-construction, and the Role of Staff as Facilitators

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Abstract: Extended Education in its current form does not always achieve the intended effects, which are closely linked to its structure and quality. While quality has often been assessed from an adult and objective perspective using predefined standards, this paper adopts a relational understanding of quality as a reflexive construct shaped through discourse and negotiation.

Building on a service-theoretical approach, the focus lies on children's perspectives to better understand the perceived benefits and uses of Extended Education. Grounded in childhood research, children are seen as experts in their own everyday experiences whose views may differ from those of adults.

This paper investigates how children perceive and co-construct quality in Extended Education. Drawing on two qualitative studies with 159 primary school children and six adolescents from one Swiss canton, the paper employs photo walks, group discussions, ethnographic observations, and interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was used to identify patterns across the data.

Findings show that Extended Education serve as important social spaces and shape opportunities for autonomy, participation, and interaction. Children not only engage, but also resist, negotiate, or selectively participate. The ability to negotiate one's own involvement emerges as a key quality dimension. Staff should focus on their roles as facilitators of participation and co-construction and quality assurance frameworks should move beyond structural indicators to systematically include children's voices.

Keywords: *Extended Education, Quality, Children's Perspective, Socio-Pedagogical User Research, Participation, Agency, Staff*

1 Introduction

Extended Education offerings are gaining significance worldwide, with more and more school-aged children¹ participating in a wide range of educational and care-related programs beyond regular school hours (Bae, 2018), referred to by various names across different contexts. Following Schüpbach et al. (2017, p. 58), we use the term *Extended Education Offering (EEO)* to refer to these diverse settings. EEOs have become key social spaces where children learn, interact, and shape their everyday experiences (Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019). As a

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1 When the term "children" is used, it refers to school-age children from 4–16, thus including young people

result, childhood is becoming increasingly embedded within institutional contexts (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024).

EEOs are expected to promote inclusion, family support, and social as well as individual learning (Bae, 2018; Stecher, 2019). However, research shows that EEOs do not always meet these expectations (Sauerwein, 2019; Thieme, 2018), as their effectiveness depends on program quality and structure (Zuechner & Fischer, 2014), on children's regular and long-term participation and the extent to which this participation is voluntary (Sauerwein, 2019).

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to quality in EEOs (Fischer et al., 2012; Landwehr, 2015; Sauerwein, 2017; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022). Traditionally, quality assessments have been adult-centric, relying on objectivist frameworks and pre-set standards. Although children generally rate EEOs positively, most existing studies capture their perspectives predominantly through quantitative surveys (Coelen & Wagener, 2010; Sauerwein, 2016; 2019). This approach restricts children's evaluations to adult-defined aspects and therefore often fails to reflect their lived experiences and active engagement. As childhood studies emphasize, children are not passive recipients but active social actors with their own perspectives (Corsaro, 2015; Corsaro & Molinari, 2017; Hauke, 2019).

To address this gap, the study adopts a relational understanding of quality (Harvey & Green, 2000) and draws on socio-pedagogical user research (Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2005), which emphasizes users' subjective experiences. Quality is thus seen as emerging in the interplay between institutional structures and individual meaning-making. This aligns with childhood studies, which recognize children and adolescents as experts in their own everyday lives.

This paper investigates how children perceive, use, and benefit from EEOs, drawing on two qualitative studies conducted in a Swiss canton—one at the primary level and one at the secondary level. Building on a relational understanding of quality, a thematic analysis is employed to explore how children actively construct and define quality in these settings.

By integrating service theory with participatory methods, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of children's perspectives and to inform the development of more responsive and sustainable educational practices.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for understanding children's perspectives on EEOs draws from recent Service Theory (2.1) and the principles of new childhood studies (2.2). Both frameworks emphasize the active role of users—children—as co-creators of social and educational services. Section 2.3 provides a literature review on quality in EEOs, with an emphasis on children's perspectives.

2.1 Service Theory Approach

Recent service theories in social work provide a useful framework for analyzing how children engage with EEOs. Socio-pedagogical user research (Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2005) con-

Talking Circles: Exploring Children's Experiences and Preferences of Food Environments in Australian Outside School Hours Care (OSHC)

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Abstract: Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) settings provide an opportunity to support children's dietary behaviours; however, exploration of children's food experiences within OSHC nutrition environment remains limited. Despite the crucial role nutrition plays in children's development and their right to be involved in decision-making, their voices are often overlooked in nutrition research. Therefore, this study explored children's experiences and preferences of the nutrition environment through semi-structured focus group discussions (i.e. *Talking Circles*). Twenty-nine children (aged 5–12 years) from three Queensland, Australia OSHC services participated in seven *Talking Circles*. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol grounded in the Socio-Ecological Model of Health, and children were encouraged to share through conversations and drawings. Data were analysed using the Framework Method, revealing three key themes: [1] Food Environment, [2] Food Preferences, and [3] Nutrition Education. Findings highlighted that food is central to children's experiences, offering nourishment, socialisation, and enjoyment; however, rigid policies and limited involvement in decision-making hinder engagement. Recommendations for future practice include involving children in food-related activities to foster the development of food agency and enhance their mealtime experiences. Alongside, greater integration of participatory approaches in nutrition research and practice to continue amplifying the voices of children.

Keywords: children's voices, nutrition environment, experience and preferences, extended education, school age care, outside school hours care.

Introduction

Nutrition plays an important role in children's health and well-being, shaping their physical, cognitive, and emotional development and influencing their ability to actively engage in learning (Bellisle, 2004; Comeau et al., 2024; Shonkoff & Richmond, 2009). Despite this recognised importance, the 2022 National Health Survey reported that less than 5% of Australian children (aged 4–13 years) meet daily fruit and vegetable recommendations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). To improve children's dietary adequacy and overall well-being, greater attention must be given to understanding and optimising nutrition environments in settings where children spend significant time.

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Globally, millions of children participate in structured before and after school programs that support parents and caregivers to engage in work and study, while providing children with opportunities for recreation and enrichment activities beyond the school day. While such programs are defined and referred to differently across international contexts, including *Afterschool Programs* in the United States, *Extended Day Programs* in Canada, and *Extended Education* is commonly used international term, in Australia these services are often referred to as *Outside School Hours Care* (OSHC), while other terminology exists (Afterschool Alliance, 2025; Maher et al., 2025).

Australian OSHC services provide care to primary school-age children (aged 5–12 years) both before and after school, and during holiday periods (Cartmel, 2019; Woods et al., 2023). Approximately one in four Australian primary school-age children attends OSHC for an average of 12.6 hours per week, contributing to a substantial part of their time outside of school (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023; Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). Children who attend OSHC have the opportunity to engage in a range of enrichment activities (i.e. arts & crafts, board games, experiential learning, and recreation), physical activity (i.e. structured or unstructured play), and are provided with food and beverages (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; Patel et al., 2025).

Within the Australian OSHC context, typically children will receive breakfast before school and an afternoon snack during the after school service (Crowe et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2025). This provision generally continues during holiday periods, while children and their caregivers are commonly responsible for providing lunch foods. While universal meal provisions are not common practice within Australian primary schools or OSHC services, it is a current area of interest and is gaining more attention within research and public health sectors (Aydin et al., 2023; Gingell et al., 2025). Food provision in Australian OSHC has been examined broadly over several years. In 2022, an observational study conducted by Crowe and colleagues of 89 Australian OSHC services during after school care, found that discretionary foods such as processed meats (i.e. chicken nuggets, hotdogs, luncheon meat), high salt/low fibre snacks (i.e. two minute noodles, chips), confectionery (i.e. cakes, biscuits), and discretionary dairy (i.e. ice-cream, custard) were offered to children more frequently than vegetables, dairy and lean meats. This observation is important to consider, as OSHC settings have the potential to play a key role in influencing children's dietary behaviours.

Food choices and dietary behaviours are shaped by a complex interplay of intrapersonal, social, physical, and political factors within nutrition environments, encompassed by the Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) of Health (Chan et al., 2022; Chen & Antonelli, 2020; Von Philipsborn et al., 2019). Settings where children spend significant amounts of time play a pivotal role in shaping dietary behaviours, as they provide social contexts, routines, and environmental cues that influence what, when, and how children eat. Within OSHC settings, the food environment, including the availability of foods, mealtime practices, routines, educator engagement, and peer interactions, can have a strong influence on children's dietary behaviours and overall relationships with food (Durão et al., 2023). OSHC therefore represents an important setting in children's lives, offering a unique opportunity to promote healthy eating, support positive food experiences, and foster lifelong health behaviours (Rowe et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2024).

Nutrition research in OSHC internationally has broadly focused on improving dietary intake and food provisions, nutrition education, staff training and health promotion, and

Exploring and developing professional strategies that enhance students' voices, participation and social inclusion across primary schools and leisure-time centers

David Thore Gravesen* and Anja Aagaard Christensen**

Abstract: This article presents findings from the Danish contribution to the Erasmus+ project *Social Inclusion through Pupils' Participation (SIPP)*, which aimed to enhance social inclusion in primary schools and leisure-time centers across five European countries. Focusing on *The Children's Parliament* activity, the article explores how Danish pedagogues implemented child participation through Lundy's model (space, voice, audience, influence), using an action research methodology. The analysis highlights the pedagogical challenges and opportunities in creating democratic spaces for children's perspectives while navigating power dynamics and professional roles. Drawing on Schuepbach and Lilla's framework for professionalism in extended education, the article discusses how inclusive and participatory practices can strengthen children's agency, social belonging, and educators' professional development in complex pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: Inclusion, Participation, Children's Perspectives, Professionalism in Extended Education, Action research

Introduction and research questions

In the Erasmus+ project Social Inclusion through Pupils' Participation (SIPP) five European countries, respectively Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, Italy, and Switzerland, collaborated to explore and develop professional strategies that enhance social inclusion across primary schools and leisure-time centers. In the project teachers and leisure pedagogues joined forces with researchers and students and together they originated a series of pedagogical and didactical approaches and activities, that were all grounded in the student's ideas and perspectives. The overall aim of the project was to prevent social exclusion and isolation among students in pedagogical environments, due to the enduring impact such feelings and experiences have on students' performance and general wellbeing (De Witte et al., 2013; OECD, 2018).

This article focuses on the Danish part of the project, offering insight into how Danish pedagogues approached social inclusion and participation through the specific activity *The Children's Parliament*, as well as the challenges they encountered throughout the process. Denmark's enduring commitment to democracy and equal rights profoundly shapes children's experiences from an early age. The reference to children with special needs in this introduction exemplifies how inclusive values are deeply embedded in the professional ethos of educators—a perspective that permeates this article. While the primary focus is not on special needs

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education, the inclusive framework is integral to mainstream schooling, where the prevailing expectation is that all children, regardless of ability, should be accommodated. Consequently, the distinction between mainstream education and special education has become increasingly fluid in contemporary Danish educational practice.

Historically, Denmark has, for more than a hundred years, focused on how the school system and pedagogical environments can support students and citizens with special needs, thereby working towards a just education system that provides equal opportunities for all citizens. In 1933, Denmark introduced a social reform allowing special education for children not benefiting from regular school (Hansen, 2013). A 1943 circular stated it was a mis-treatment not to adapt education to a child's abilities, and by 1958, special education became compulsory. In 1960, reforms emphasized equal opportunities and reduced segregation of children with special needs (Qvortrup, 2015). During the 1980 s, the focus shifted from integration—where the child must adapt—to inclusion, where schools adapt to all children (Pedersen, 2014). The Salamanca Declaration (1994) supported fewer segregated placements and more inclusive education globally (Qvortrup, 2014). Despite Denmark's inclusion goals, special education placements increased by 50% from 2001–2010. In 2009, Denmark ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, reinforcing its commitment to inclusive education (Pedersen, 2014). With these historical and contextual dynamics in mind, the research questions for this article are: How can student's experiences and perspectives be used as effective tools for promoting social inclusion within pedagogical environments? Additionally, how can educators be supported in developing, implementing, and evaluating practices using action research methods to enhance students' social inclusion within schools and leisure-time settings?

Background and national context

Since the early 2000 s, Danish laws and policies have increasingly reflected international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Salamanca Declaration, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the field of social and special pedagogy, inclusion is an implicit part of the Consolidation Act on Social Services, especially §11, which emphasizes coordinated support for children with special needs. Similarly, in early childhood education, the 2004 pedagogical curriculum and the 2007 Day Care Act mandate municipalities to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion through pedagogical and social initiatives (Quvang, 2015; Buus, 2014; Madsen, 2009). In 2012, Denmark introduced an inclusion law aiming to integrate more pupils with special needs into mainstream public primary school classes (Quvang, 2015). Despite earlier best practice studies, both costs and referrals to special education had increased. The law was later incorporated into the 2014 school reform, which limited support to pupils with significant needs and set a goal of 96% inclusion by 2015. However, by 2012, 94.6% were already included, and in 2016 the target was dropped following expert recommendations to focus on *qualitative* inclusion—supporting individual needs, participation, and learning environments. By 2020, inclusion had declined to 94.4%, nearly the same as in 2012.