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“In this class we are so different that I can be myself!” Intercultural dialogue in a first grade upper secondary school in Norway

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ABSTRACT

Focus of this article is immigrant youth and Norwegians-born to immigrant parents in upper secondary school in Norway. The study was conducted in a first year of a general study class in upper secondary school, where 11 of 24 students were immigrants. Previous research on immigrants in school tends to show a picture of a marginalized group in Norwegian schools which is characterized by egalitarianism. The research question of the article is: What can we learn from students' experiences with an inclusive class environment based on a case study? What contributes to their experience of a good class environment? Through observation of the class and interviews with students, we find that diversity is accepted. Pupils show mutual respect for each other and they do not define others based on ethnicity. The way in which school and teachers work with the class is of great importance. An intentional structure is framing the possibilities for intersubjective relations. Through these possibilities the participants create mutual meaning.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant youth; upper secondary school; diversity; intercultural education; inter-subjectivity

Introduction

“The students are giving presentations. Karim is evidently feeling down. He looks out into the air absent-mindedly: something is clearly bothering him. The others give their presentations and he listens quietly. Then it is his turn. He presents his contribution quietly and soberly before calmly returning to his seat. The boys in the class gather around him, hug him and pat him on the back, complimenting him on his presentation. They nod and say, “This was damned good!” Thumbs up and applause as he returns to his seat.”

This observation was made in a first grade class (age 16) in an upper secondary school in Norway. The study, for which we did the observation, was conducted in a Programme for General Studies. The above quote exemplifies the intercultural capacity in this class. Karim, a boy with immigrant mother and Norwegian father, had a rather poor presentation of his project this day. However, he gave his presentation, and the

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class appreciated his contribution. In this class there are 24 students, 6 of them immigrants and 5 Norwegians born to immigrant parents. The aim of the article is to gain more knowledge about how immigrants and Norwegians born to immigrant parents, experience upper secondary education. Examining their experiences with school enables us to learn how young people understand their role as pupils. The youngsters provide useful information whether school actually is a place where all students experience equality and equal rights to education.

The article uses the terms 'immigrant' and 'Norwegians born to immigrant parents', since these are the terms used by Statistics Norway (SSB 2016). Immigrants are persons born abroad to two foreign parents, who have immigrated to Norway. Norwegians born to immigrant parents are born in Norway, but have two immigrant parents (SSB 2016). 16% of the population in Norway are immigrants or Norwegians born to immigrant parents (SSB 2016).

The article is part of a larger project which examines how immigrant youths and Norwegians born to immigrant parents experience upper secondary school in Norway (Solbue, 2014). In the first part of the project, focus is on upper secondary school with vocational programs (Solbue, 2013), while in this article focus is on upper secondary school with academic programs. There is little or no research on immigrant students' experiences with school in Norway, and to our knowledge there is a lack of research of these students' experiences in upper secondary school. Based on our observations of what we perceived to be a good class-environment, we decided to expand the scope of the study and interview all the students in the class in order to learn about their experiences of a good class environment. The aim of the study is to shed light on the youngsters' perceptions of school and on how the students experienced their everyday life at school. We selected the class with the highest percentage of immigrant students. Very soon we had to change our pre-conceptions of a class where the pupils should be concerned with ethnical dividing lines. The current study presents another picture of life in school than statistics presenting dropouts and grade levels of immigrant students. The research questions in this article are as follows: What can we learn from students' experiences with an inclusive class environment based on a case study? What contributes to experience of a good class environment?

Intercultural dialogue in the class

Focus of the study is how students experience school. The literature research led to other studies with a similar focus, for example, Liang, Grossman and Diguchi's (2007) study which investigated the subjective experiences of Asian-American students with discrimination at school. These findings can give us a picture of the students' experiences with bullying and exclusion at school and information about how that experience influenced their school attendance (Liang, Grossman and Deguchi 2007). A Canadian case-study investigated a Chinese immigrant student's experiences with school including the family (Xu et al. 2007). The findings surprised the researchers, because they were informed about how complicated it is for the family from China to translate the values from school in China to the Canadian context. The researchers claim that the cultural differences may have severe consequences for students who face learning

disabilities and social problems (Xu et al. 2007). In a Swedish study about what experiences immigrant youth in upper secondary school have with integration and how they construct their plans for life, Johansson and Olofsson (2011) found that the immigrant students try to adapt to the normative expectation associated with the idea of being Swedish (Johansson and Olofsson 2011). In Norway Hauge (2014) has contributed to a new understanding of how schools handle the challenge of integrating immigrant students. She shows how schools either focus on problems or possibilities. Few studies ask about the pupils' own experiences. Hvistendahl, (2009) has used minority language pupils' stories to analyze the role of language in the process of socialization, however few other studies asking for the immigrant pupils' own experiences have been conducted in Norway. The current study seeks to contribute to further understanding of how schools meet immigrant students by learning about their experiences in a multicultural school context.

In order to shed light on the intercultural dialogue in the class – that is, a class in which the students interact – we base our work on intercultural education and inter-subjectivity. Both theories are based on meaning created by participants who interact with each other in different situations and suggest that this meaning undergoes constant change and movement.

Multicultural and intercultural education

In Norway a frequently used theory to explain the multicultural classroom is the theory about multicultural education. Multicultural education uses theory about other cultures in order to produce acceptance or tolerance. Above all, this means recognizing diversity and respecting it “as it is” without claiming to modify it (Portera 2011, 19). The term ‘intercultural’ consists of two concepts. By ‘inter’ we mean mutual dependence, interaction and exchange of ideas, while ‘culture’ means the recognition of values, lifestyle and symbolic representations that people and groups refer to in their relations to others and in their understanding of the world (Rey-Von Allmen 2011). Consequently, the term ‘intercultural’ includes the chain of interactions that take place in and between cultures, which also change in time and space (Rey-Von Allmen 2011). The term ‘intercultural dialogue’ is used in the document *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (2008) from The European Council and refers to an open and respectful dialogue based on an exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, based on mutual understanding and respect (Council of Europe 2008).

Intercultural education aims to go beyond passive co-existence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of, respect for, and dialogue between the different cultural groups (UNESCO, Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006, 17). Intercultural education is based on the ideas of transcultural and multicultural education. However, it also includes interaction, direct exchange of ideas, and principles of behaviors between the participants (Portera 2011).

Abdallah-Preteille (2006) claims that considering the multicultural in terms such as categories and characteristics means justifying a policy based on ethnicity. The intercultural potential is not found in objective facts, but in social constructions. In other

words, the interaction between members is central. The group's competence does not consist of knowledge, but of "know-how". It is not a question of training intercultural competence, but of understanding other people (Abdallah-Preteille 2006). This understanding of other people is based on the ability:

To learn to see, to hear, to be mindful of other people, to learn to be alert and open in a perspective of diversity and not of differences, call for the recognition and experience of otherness, experience that is acquired and that is practiced (Abdallah-Preteille 2006, 478).

When trying to understand interactions in a class and between its members, inter-subjectivity is a term that can be used to interpret the data (Gillespie and Cornish 2010). The concept of inter-subjectivity is defined as an agreement between interlocutors entering a dialogue with different views (Rommetveit 1985). The basic premise of inter-subjectivity may be understood as the ability to adopt the perspective of others which is different from one's own. The reason that the interlocutors understand each other is that they establish a temporary shared social reality (Rommetveit 1974, 1979).

Context

An important aim in Norwegian education policy is to create an inclusive school for all pupils. This aim is not only a slogan, but a statement that can be traced in the Education Act (Opplæringsloven 2006). Consequently, organizational structures causing differentiation between pupils with different cultural background has been thoroughly discussed. However, the last few years' precautions like for example *introduction classes* where immigrant students are segregated for a period in order to learn Norwegian, have increased (Hilt 2016). The Norwegian school system is divided into three levels; primary school from 6 years to 13, lower secondary school from 13 to 16 years, upper secondary from 16 to 19. All students between 16 – 24 years are entitled to a three-year upper secondary education which is voluntary. Compulsory education (ages 6-16) and upper secondary school (ages 16-19) are based on a national curriculum (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2007). Most upper secondary schools are comprehensive with academic and vocational study programmes.

The fieldwork was carried out in first grade in upper secondary school, in a programme for general studies. This school was selected because they have many students with different cultural backgrounds. In relation to our project we asked if we could observe the class with most students defined as immigrants.

In this case-study there are 24 students in the class, 10 girls and 14 boys. 13 of these are Norwegians born to Norwegian parents, 11 are immigrants or Norwegians born to immigrant parents, out of whom 10 are from non-western countries and one from Eastern Europe. All the immigrants speak Norwegian, but some of the newcomers do not speak the language fluently. The class is representative for the school where about 40% of the students are immigrants or Norwegians born to immigrant parents. Subjects taught are Norwegian, English, mathematics, science, social studies, geography, physical education and foreign languages. The class has different teachers teaching the various subjects, but two teachers act as tutors for the class. All teachers are ethnic Norwegians.

Method

The aim of the study is to learn and understand more about the experiences immigrant youth have in upper secondary school. Focus of interviews and observations was on what we could learn from the students' experiences. What could they tell us about their everyday life at school? We were especially interested in information about how they experienced the influence of their own everyday life and to what extent their background added colour to the schooldays. Life story research is about how people give their lives meaning. The youths' own interpretation of themselves at school is placed at the centre (Johansson 2005).

Several methods of collecting stories are used in this explorative ethnographic-inspired study. We triangulated the data-collections by using various instruments (Hammersly and Atkins 2007) such as field notes, observations of teaching situations, interviews (30-minute interviews with 19 youths), and field conversations (conversations with students in the field). The interview was based on the first analyses of the observations and field notes. When analysing the observations the search of relevant theory started, a theory that could help us analysing the multicultural class and the interaction taking place. Two researchers observed the class for 2 hours, 3 days a week in order to strengthen the validity of the qualitative empirical data. The observation period lasted 3 weeks. After the observation period, we prepared an interview guide (based on the observations) for the 19 students. 3 of the students were not present in the class during the observation period (all of them ethnic Norwegians), and two of them chose not to participate in the interview. One of the students who chose not to participate in the interview is Karim whom we introduced in the beginning of the paper. The interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were semi-structured interviews in which we asked about their previous education and background, their current education, the class and its environment. All data are depersonalized.

Analysing the life-stories

The data were analysed in two steps. The vertical analysis (Kelchtermans 1999), is a narrative analysis of 12 informants from the class. Narrative analysis often employs an analysis that seeks to identify common themes or conceptual manifestations in the story that has been collected (Polkinghorne 1995). We have structured the narratives by genre and character. This provides an interpretive framework which affects the *meaning* the author ascribes to events (Johansson 2005). Having read through all the interviews pupils are selected based on criteria of who told their narratives about the class. Not all the narratives were re-written as a text, but the interviews were categorized by genre and character. Reading through all the interviews the researchers tried to understand the meaning behind the story that was told. In this context the aim was to understand how the interviewees described their own role and their relation to the rest of the class.

The narratives have been titled as: "the cosmopolitan", "the survivor", "not included", "the joker" and "the negotiator". The titles indicate the meaning that can be extracted from the interview during the analysis. The narratives are structured as a life story of the students' experience of everyday school life (Polkinghorne 1995). We started out with an intention of presenting some of the narratives in the article in order

to highlight the characteristics of a class in which diversity is accepted. This proved to be difficult, as inter-subjective relations form the core theory in intercultural theory. Consequently, we took the analysis one step further, that is, to consider the students' vertical narratives as the foundation for a horizontal analysis (Kelchtermans 1999). In our horizontal analysis we carried out a thematic narrative analysis to keep the stories intact while using certain stable concepts across the case studies (Riessman 2008). This is also known as a horizontal analysis (Kelchtermans 1999). In the horizontal analysis we defined categories and extracted quotes from the text that are classified and collected in categories highlighting inter-subjective relations about what characterizes a class in which diversity is accepted.

The emerging categories from this reading were: "reasons for a good class environment", "not included", "inclusion", "gender", "class environment", "conflict", "teachers and school", "multicultural class", "observations", "Utøya¹", and "friends". This process of analysis was predominantly carried out by the first author, before the second writer drew out analysis categories such as "safety" and "friendship" from the reading. Only *one* narrative from the vertical analysis will be presented in this article. The reason why this narrative was chosen is that it comes from a girl who is not included in the class and represents a divergence in the analysis.

Presentation of the class

The presentation of the class, i.e. the data material, is organized into the different categories found in the analysis. The categories tell us something about the intercultural dialogue in the class and the characteristics of a class in which diversity is accepted. The horizontal analysis is presented first, before one of the vertical analyses is presented as a narrative. As mentioned above, this narrative shows how a student who is not included in the community of the class experiences it. Notes from observations are included in the analysis-process.

Class environment

The way the students describe the class environment may tell us something about the intercultural dialogue in the class. Some of the students have had a difficult time in lower secondary school and can refer to stories of bullying and difficult incidents. When speaking of the current class, they describe a class environment unlike any they have ever experienced before. One of the girls, Christel, was bullied in elementary and lower secondary school. She was born and raised in Norway, but her parents are Asian, and she describes the class environment as follows:

Well, the class is a like family in a way – everyone is friends with everyone. When you enter the class you feel welcome. Like, warm and safe. It's not like you dread every day and think: 'Oh no, now I have to go to school.'

This quote is representative of what class members told us about the class environment. Some would tell us that there are some groups in the class, but they do not prevent contact across the groups. When the students describe the class environment they emphasize confidence and friendship as important elements in making the class a good place to be.

On being in a class with students from different countries

When we asked the students about their experience of being in a class with students from many different countries, the main attitude was positive and few negative experiences were reported. They related different positive experiences, and Siri, a Norwegian girl who was bullied in lower secondary school, told us that here everyone was so different that she could be herself. In lower secondary school she felt that the problem was that she stood apart from the rest of the class and had trouble feeling a sense of belonging to the community.

Jacob, who had lived in Norway for 3 years, had the following to say about being in a multicultural class:

I can say that we actually have a good time together, and we learn things from each other. And we use that all the time. For instance, we use words from the Somali language, and we use words from my language all the time. It's fun to learn things like that.

The students reported positive experiences with being in a class with students from different countries. They find it enriching to learn from different countries and cultures, and this makes the class a good place to be.

How a conflict was solved

During our field period a conflict developed between two of the boys in the class. We perceived that the mood changed during our observation, and when we started interviewing the students, this was something many of them were concerned with. Several students told us about the conflict. Siri was also interested in the conflict, and she was interviewed before the class meeting:

There aren't many conflicts in class, but it did happen once some time ago when there was a fight during physical education. There aren't really any discussions in class, but now I feel there's a kind of split – because the two boys belonged to the same group of friends. But now they don't talk much. I feel that it's kind of sad. The teacher had seen them shake hands and make up, after all. But it isn't easy to make up when it is the way it is. Both of them feel that it is the other's fault, so I can sort of understand them. But I'm friends with both of them; I try to, as much as I can. Don't want to take one side over the other, you know. That could have led to consequences, and I don't want to lose any of them, in a way.

The teachers saw that the conflict was not resolved with a handshake in class, and determined to talk about this at a class meeting. Katherina, a Norwegian-born girl with immigrant parents, told us about how they worked with the conflict in class:

A few weeks ago there was a conflict between two classmates. We addressed it on Monday. We sat in a circle, and everyone told how they felt about the conflict and how we could solve it. Those who were involved in the conflict listened to what we had to say. We solved it in a pretty good way, I think.

The students mention the conflict, but do not take sides in it. They prefer to talk about how they find it problematic that there is a conflict in class, and that they try to keep both friends without taking sides. When the teachers approach the conflict through a conversation carried out in a circle where everyone is encouraged to speak their mind, the issue appears to be resolved.

Reasons for the good class environment

Roberto from South America, who may be defined as one of the leaders in the class, says the following about how they have managed to create this good environment:

Everyone takes responsibility for creating a good class environment, it is not just one person that works towards it – everyone does. We kind of stick together.

Jacob believes this is the reason for the good environment:

Perhaps it's because when I started here, no one knew each other, so we could become good friends from the beginning. Not like in lower secondary school. I started in the middle of the 8th grade, and people already knew each other.

Katherina considers that it might also have something to do with the teachers:

Perhaps it wasn't so good in the beginning, when we first got to know each other. It was a bit embarrassing, you know, because we weren't used to each other. But now we have known each other for six months, and it's almost automatic. We have been going hiking and things like that. In some of our social science lessons we sit in a circle and talk about things. That makes us get to know each other better. We talk about how we feel and we have talked a lot about the class environment and how we would like it to be. And if something is wrong we discuss it and everyone is allowed to have their say in the matter. All of us have different opinions, but we are able to agree on something in the end. That might be one of the reasons why the class environment is so good.

The students mention the importance of everyone taking responsibility for a good class environment. It is also important that the students were strangers to each other. Although teachers are seldom mentioned, it is evident that the teachers and their methods in working with the class play a role in creating its good environment. The teachers have addressed the importance of caring for each other when students give presentations, as shown in the observation in the introduction. During this presentation, the students were asked to present their own linguistic identity. Here, the students share something about themselves with the community, and by making themselves vulnerable to the others, a collective sense of confidence and safety is created (Helleve 2008). Moreover, one of the teachers has used a good pedagogic approach to create a class environment and help the students open up and be confident in each other.

Everyone is not included

When we ask if all students are included in the group, not many tell us about the one girl who is not. Aisha has lived in Norway since she was 10 years old, and is originally from Asia. Our observations show a girl who is only spoken to by one other student, Kahleb, who comes from the same country and is four years older. One example from our observations of the class shows a typical example of how she is ignored in class:

Benedicte from Norway needs a power adapter for her PC. She asks everyone who has an adapter to borrow theirs, but all of them are in use. Aisha has a power adapter, but is not asked. Benedicte borrows one from the teacher.

Three students offer some reflections on the fact that there is one person that is not included in the class environment. Roberto told us this:

I don't really know, I mean, we have tried to talk to her. We welcomed her when she arrived and talked to her. Well, she does not say anything about how she feels in class, if she has any friends, but then again, she rarely takes the initiative. And that makes it a bit difficult, because we can't really force her to be with us, either.

Reza who has lived in Norway for six years thinks that the reason might be that she is satisfied with her situation.:

I think she feels a bit left out. It's like, there's no one who is with her all the time. But she kind of stands out, and I think she wants to, in a way, or.... It's like, if you try to be a part of the community, we won't say no. But she doesn't try. Like, if you talk to her, the conversation ends quickly.

Only Siri, who had a hard time in lower secondary school, reflects on whether she has done enough to include the student:

No, everyone is really not included. And I actually feel kind of sad about it. She sits all by herself. I should do something, but I can't do it alone. The way the class is now, we should've thought: Why is she sitting there? I usually wouldn't care about that, but even if I want to do something, it becomes so difficult. We don't have common interests or anything. So what should I say? It would be awkward to sit down there, and then we would just sit there and that's it.

The students notice that Aisha is left out, but believe that it is due to her own lack of initiative and that she wants it that way. In the following Aisha tells us how she feels in class.

Not included

The following presents a narrative from Aisha who is not included in the community. She has a completely different experience of the class than the others. She came to Norway when she was 10 years old. She is the only girl in class that wears a hijab. The girl has lived 10 years of her life in a highly sheltered and isolated society in an Asian country.

I think it's very boring in upper secondary school. Here, they do not care to sit with me. That makes me furious at times. When I started here this autumn, a few months after the others, I wanted to be with everyone because I used to hang out with many friends at the other school. I was used to having lots of friends around me. But when I approached them and tried to talk to them, they just sort of hid behind each other. They don't want to be with me. Norwegians see that we can speak Norwegian, but they don't want to talk to us. They like being together. So, after a few months I realized that they don't want to be with me. I figured that I just have to manage by my own. I spoke to the teachers. They have been very kind to me and tried many different things. I got to choose who I would sit with. The one I chose seemed very nice and kind, but she just moves and talks to her other friends. I have been all alone for almost a year, and it makes me very sad. I am boring to be with, I think.

I don't understand, don't understand anything. I just said to her, 'Is it because I wear a hijab?' Is this the reason why you don't talk to me? I was furious, you know. I don't know if it's because of the hijab, I just think that way. During physical education everyone are with their groups, and I walk around all by myself. I get very angry in physical education too, because when we are together in groups, I sort of have to be like the girl behind them.

No one dares speak to me, really. I just say, okay, so this is the penultimate year. Then it's over, so it almost doesn't matter.

I find it very strange that I haven't made friends with anyone here. This autumn I attended a different school for a few months before starting here, and I had friends there. They spent a lot of time with me and asked, 'Will you join us? Will you join us?' But this never happens here.

Aisha represents a divergence from the rest of the stories analysed, as she tells a completely different story about the class than the rest of the students. She has no friends in class and does not feel seen and heard by the others.

How can this happen? The analysis of her narrative shows that the girl became part of the class later than the rest. This may have a significant impact on the inclusion process, as the first part of the project shows. Here, a boy started in class later than the rest, and he was the only one who was not included (Solbue 2013). Aisha also sets herself apart by using a hijab, which she believes to be part of the explanation. The hijab is an outwardly visible identifier, so her explanation may be correct. A Swedish study shows how there was a collective ambivalence in the class against the only immigrant girl who wore hijab. The ambivalence helped to create a positive picture of the "Swedish student" for the rest of the class (Ambjörnsson 2008.)

It might be possible to find explanations for why she is not included by understanding the interactions between the students and her as lacking mutuality and shared responsibility. At the same time there is also a criticism of the class embedded in Siri's statement when she considers what the others would think if she sat down next to Aisha. This may indicate that the intercultural dialogue in class fails to be open to diversity in this case – that in this case they focus on the differences, for example the way Ashia communicates and interacts with the other students.

A class where diversity seems to be accepted

When students in this class describe why the class is a good place to be, the story of how they deal with the conflict is of interest. The students found it problematic because they did not want to take sides. This may tell us something about the intersubjective capacity that enables imitation, empathy, sympathy and recognition (Bråten 1998, Helleve 2008). According to Rommetveit (1985) acceptance of the other is an integrated part of intersubjectivity. Inter-subjectivity is based on faith in a shared world in which the basic skill can be understood as the ability to adopt the perspective of others who are different. The reason why people understand each other is that they establish a temporary shared social reality (Rommetveit 1974). This class can be described as a temporary shared social reality. In this social reality, we find a multitude of different backgrounds that engage in dialogue with each other: a class that is a good place to be precisely because the students are so different.

In this class we observe that safety and friendship are important factors emphasized by the students in describing the good class environment. Previous research shows the importance of cross-cultural friendships in school, and the effect on psychological satisfaction (Ward & Searle 1991). It is, however, important to gain more knowledge about how schools can make use of positive cross-cultural friendships (Vedder & Horenczyk 2006) in order to strengthen the educational and social environment. In

the current study the school has succeeded in creating an interculturality that provides space for confident encounters between different participants. Most class members take responsibility for creating a good class environment. Several students, who have previously had difficult experiences as adolescents and have been bullied, perceive this class as safe. Meanwhile there is also some tension, due to one girl not being included. Consequently, the inter-subjective skills of this class still need to be developed. Aisha is not part of the temporary, shared social reality of the class. The exclusion of her is, in many ways, worse because the others are so clearly included. Ambjørnsen (2008) made a similar observation of a girl with hijab in an upper secondary school in Sweden who did not interact with the other students. Findings show that the girl in hijab is placed in an outside position because of her way of dressing. The class' attitude may be interpreted as a collective idea from the society; the prejudice of an immigrant girl who is quiet and oppressed without possibilities to act as a "Swedish girl". The same prejudice from the school-mates may be the reason why the girl in hijab in the current study also experienced herself as an outsider.

Educators will seek the recipe for this kind of intercultural dialogue in a class where there is a great acceptance of the other. Such a recipe is difficult to provide, as one of the premises in an inter-subjective, shared social reality is temporariness. It is composed of the individuals that are together in class, and no other social shared reality will construct the same sense of belonging to the group as the one we see here. Nevertheless, we may extract some indicators from the material. The students started in the class at the same time and are new to each other, and the one who started later does not take part in the community in the same way as the others. The fact that everyone is different is also mentioned as a key factor. But the combination of the different students does not create a good class environment with room for diversity in and of itself. The school and the teachers play a vital role in this case study, in for example the presentation that all the students held about their linguistic identity. By sharing something about themselves with the community, each person makes themselves vulnerable to the community. This vulnerability forms the basis of a collective sense of confidence and forms the basis for inter-subjectivity and temporary shared spaces of understanding (Helleve 2008). Furthermore, the way one of the teachers addressed the conflict that affected the class and let everyone share their thoughts about the conflict, shows a method that strengthens interculturality by letting the students themselves define their impression of the conflict. This kind of discussion gives room for a joint construction of meaning in class and confirms findings from a previous study in which analysis showed that school structure and the teachers' working methods, including teamwork and being familiar with the students' background, are important to include immigrants as active members of the class' community of practice (Solbue 2013). The findings are in many ways consistent with a study of Garmon (2005) postulating six key factors associated with changing preservice teachers' attitudes concerning their beliefs about diversity. The key-factors are dispositions (openness, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness) and commitment to social justice (p. 275). Intercultural experiences, understood as direct interactions with individuals from racial/cultural groups different than one's own (p. 279) are also highly valued in the current study.

Conclusion

In this first grade in upper secondary school there are 24 students. 11 of these are immigrants or Norwegians born to immigrant parents. As researchers we invited ourselves into this class to understand more of the experiences immigrants have with upper secondary education in academic studies. By analysing the data we are able to detect certain characteristics of a class in which diversity seems to be accepted, i.e. characteristics of an intercultural dialogue in class. Some of the signifiers of these characteristics are that teachers and the school practice what we have defined as multicultural education. However, in addition there is a focus on factors that include relations and interactions between the participants. One of the most important factors is the acceptance of diversity in the group, not only diversity based on ethnicity, but also on gender, interests and social backgrounds.

In the first part of this project, where students in two classes in a vocational education program were interviewed, we found that one of the classes could be defined as a multicultural class where the immigrant students were included in the class environment (Solbue 2013). But the students were still categorized as immigrants or ethnic Norwegians (Solbue 2013). In the current study, the students show mutual respect for each other and they do not define or categorize each other based on ethnicity.

A major conclusion of this study is that educators should look for opportunities, and not limitations, in diverse classrooms by contributing to the development of an intercultural capacity in the class. In diversity there are possibilities to develop interculturality and inter-subjectivity through opening up for using the students' own experiences and knowledge. This is the strength of intercultural education where interaction between the students is in focus, and not categories such as gender or ethnicity. This study, which is based on the experiences from one class, is not generalizable. However, the results of the study point at the importance of listening to students' in order to be able to create a class environment that is based on differences that allows everyone to be her/himself. The findings in the current study underline the importance of intercultural exchange and dialogue on a regional, national and international level.

Note

1. The killing of 78 young Norwegians, July 22, 2011

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