

THE L1 SUBJECT IN A WORLD OF INCREASING  
INDIVIDUALISM.  
DEMOCRATIC PARADOXES IN NORWEGIAN L1  
CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Ever since the 1930s when the Social Democrats took over, Norwegian public school has been based on a democratic metaphor of liberation. John Dewey's ideas about pragmatism offered a way to think about a free individual associated with modernity. In this article we examine the L1 subject today and its didactical traditions in the still student-oriented, open and democratic Norwegian school. In this tradition the L1 subject, a humanistic and hermeneutic subject, has been closely related to "natural" interpretations of everyday life and to everyday discourses and understandings. As this subject is approached in modern, student-oriented schools and in contemporary individual-oriented cultures, learning difficulties commonly arise for a growing number of students. We present three qualitative studies that all show aspects of this same problem (Elf & Kaspersen (ed.) 2012; Skarstein, 2013; Penne, 2014). They reveal aspects of the same trend and can help explain the increasing social inequalities in Norwegian schools.

Keywords: social differences, individuality, identities, affinities, literacy

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*Penne, S. & Skarstein, D. (2015). The L1 subject in a world of increasing individualism. Democratic paradoxes in Norwegian L1 classrooms. Contribution to a special issue Paradoxes and Negotiations in Scandinavian L1 Research in Languages, Literatures and Literacies, edited by Ellen Krogh and Sylvi Penne. L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 15, p. 1-18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2015.15.01.04>*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The standard of an open, inclusive school for all has been both a defining characteristic and a source of pride for the Scandinavian countries — a democratic measure aimed at reducing social differences. In Norway the first educational reform was undertaken in 1939 and implemented in the post-war period. Research has shown that the post-war national commitment to public schools and educational opportunities really had the anticipated democratic effects (Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006; Raaum, Salvanes, & Sørensen, 2006), however, such democratic gains are no longer being achieved. Although the public school system has been maintained and is further developed — few countries invest more in schools and education than Norway — social inequalities are increasing in Norwegian schools as in so many other countries (Bakken, 2004, 2007, 2009; Bakken & Elstad, 2012).

Why would such major national investments in school and education, and such good intentions, have such a minor effect? In this article we will be exploring and discussing one aspect of this complicated issue, with emphasis on the L1-subject and recent empirical data from Norway. L1 is a humanistic and hermeneutic school subject. This subject is about reading and writing — but is also about being able to interpret and understand our world — our everyday life. However, this closeness to everyday language and everyday thinking may be a challenge for many contemporary students with strong individual meaning structures or identity constructions (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 2000-2001, 2012; Johnson & Lakoff, 1999; Twenge, 2006; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995, Wertsch 2002; Ziehe, 2007). Learning requires some distance to our everyday world — a certain degree of meta-linguistic awareness or literacy skills. To master L1 is to develop the ability to interpret and understand different texts in different contexts. As Olson (1994) points out:

To be literate it is not enough to know the words; one must learn how to participate in the discourse of some textual community. And that implies knowing which texts are important, how they are to be read and interpreted, and how they are to be applied in talk and action (p. 273).

This paper presents two recent qualitative studies based on interviews with L1 students in respectively lower secondary school (Penne, 2014) and upper secondary school (Skarstein, 2013). In addition, we draw on a third study (Elf & Kaspersen (Ed.), 2012) conducted by the present authors in collaboration with seven other researchers from the three Scandinavian countries. This study was based on interviews with Danish, Norwegian and Swedish L1 teachers. The nine researchers had access to all collected data.

### 1.1 "Learning by doing"

The first educational reform in Norway (1939) was, in line with this reform's emancipatory goals, based on a methodology of liberation that historians have described

as reform pedagogy and liberal progressivism. The new democratic, liberating school model envisaged participation by students who would learn by doing. The influence of the American pragmatist John Dewey is obvious. Student-oriented methods have dominated Norwegian schools ever since, and the concept of the mentoring and facilitating teacher remains a powerful metaphor in Norwegian educational discourse (Johnson & Lakoff, 1999; Dale, 2010; Foros & Vetlesen, 2012; Penne, 2012). During the 1970s the active pedagogical metaphors became even more based on "freedom" - even the institutional framing of schooling should be naturalized - or what Vetlesen and Foros (2012) call the invisible pedagogy:

The invisible pedagogy—a concept that arose during the 1970s—is characterized by indistinct goals, unclear demands, random assessments and an insecure teacher role. Boundaries were erased, both in a physical sense, when open schools became popular—and in an educational sense, since both the student role and teacher roles became unclear (Vetlesen & Foros, 2012, p. 168).

This "insecure teacher role" in Norwegian schools might have become even more complicated by the curriculum goal of "adapted teaching" - introduced in the 1960s and first used primarily for pupils with special needs, adapted teaching became a democratic right for all in 1985. According to the 2006 Knowledge Promotion Reform, inclusive, individually adapted education requires that all pupils participate academically, culturally, and socially *based on their abilities and aptitudes*.

### 1.2 "Why Do We Have to Learn Such Boring Stuff?" Affinities and Individualized Identities versus "Being an L1 Student" in the Norwegian School Setting

An official reason for the introduction of the latest school reform in Norway (2006, rev. 2013) was to counteract increasing social inequalities. The most recent state-funded study suggests that just the opposite has occurred<sup>1</sup> (Bakken & Elstad, 2012, p. 261).

Why this adverse result when Norwegian schools are so inclusive and democratic intentions so high? In what follows, we will present our recent research from L1 classrooms, aiming at elucidating what factors create learning difficulties and success in learning L1. As an introduction, two relevant theoretical approaches are shortly presented; one on individuality and identity (Twenge, 2006), and one on language and discourses in learning contexts (Gee, 2012).

In her study of American schools and students, the psychologist Jean Twenge (2006) claims that the focus on individuality has gone too far. One cannot learn without being open to new, different worlds. Twenge cites the following factors that might disrupt learning in American schools:

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<sup>1</sup>*This tendency is stronger than the expected difference between majority and minority students: "Statistical techniques that adjust for students' family background show that the grades among students with immigrant background on average is a little better than majority students, given the same socioeconomically level" (Bakken & Elstad, 2012, p. 255).*

- the pragmatization of the content of educational activities
- an identity discourse in the learning culture
- a significant demand for motivating
- a normative popular culture

The three first factors are especially influential in learning contexts. A school culture in which learners demand individual relevance that confirms who they are does not promote learning. Twenge (2006) concludes: "We are in danger of producing individuals who are experts at knowing how they feel rather than educated individuals who know how to think" (p. 223).

One consequence of this cultural shift towards individuality is that our teenagers are becoming "students" in a culture with blurred boundaries between authority and individual. In such cultures there will be a growing need to highlight who you are or want to be - which for the least motivated students often weakens their focus on being a student, their student identity. For the more motivated students, however, it may reinforce it (Gee, 2000-2001).

With Twenge we could talk about two different identity discourses that can be seen in the learning culture – or what the sociolinguist James Paul Gee calls students' discursive identities or affinities, and a more "institutional identity" that is needed in the school context (Gee 2000-2001). These different attitudes towards "learning" in school will naturally affect the learning contexts and the students' final grades. Gee (2012) introduces the concepts primary and secondary Discourses<sup>2</sup> that clarifies these different discursive aspects.

### *1.3 Primary and Secondary Discourses – with or without meta-language.*

Students start school with different prior understandings. These prior understandings, which encompass experiences, language, habits, affinities and feelings, constitute what Gee (2003) calls their "primary Discourse":

Primary Discourses constitute our first social identity, and something of a base within which we acquire or resist later Discourses. They form our initial taken-for-granted understandings of who we are and who people "like us" are, as well as what sorts of things we ("people like us") do, value, and believe when we are not in public (p. 165).

This quote emphasizes 'value', an aspect which is not very well communicated in curricula and pedagogical writings. The primary discourse is a 'value discourse' and is part of different networks of meaning; it may, or may not, support school activities. The students have for example different experiences with written texts. Written texts - reflections on and interpretations of such texts - will always be important in a school context. Some feel comfortable at school because of a match

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<sup>2</sup> Gee (2005) makes this distinction between "discourse" and "Discourse": "I use the term "Discourse" with a capital "D," for ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognized identity"(p. 21).

with their primary Discourse, while for others school may be more or less foreign. This is a major challenge in an individualized learning context. Ideally, school is more or less about constant meetings with new and different thinking and texts, what Gee calls “secondary Discourses”. The purpose of schooling is to encourage openness to unfamiliar and new discourses (Ziehe, 2007).

Gee (2003) emphasizes the difference between *acquisition* and *learning*. This difference concerns the question of pre-understanding, the awareness of secondary Discourses. What many students have already acquired when starting school, others have to learn actively. Teaching which is mainly based on assumed acquisition, rather than metalinguistic awareness, may reinforce the differences that already exist:

Teaching that leads to learning uses explanation and analyses that break down material into its analytic bits and juxtaposes diverse Discourses and their practices to each other. Such teaching develops meta-knowledge. While many ‘liberal’ approaches to education look down on this mode of teaching, I do not; I have already said that I believe that meta-knowledge can be a form of power and liberation (ibid., p.145).

Sociocultural differences predominate in many Norwegian classrooms (Bakken & Elstad 2012), but are seldom focused when the instruction is student-oriented. Then many students will continue to respond to schools’ institutional rules and procedures with their primary Discourses and everyday attitudes, and not acquire the needed awareness of secondary Discourses. According to Gee (2012), literacy for students is a question of mastering secondary Discourses. A prerequisite is metalinguistic awareness in the learning process - contextual understanding and interpretation.

What does it take to develop such skills? Learning in a school context requires determined action and often hard work. To find meaning in such activities one must accept being a student – having the identity of a student in the learning context. Students must be open, curious and prepared to listen to others. This attitude to the learning process gradually changes students’ mediating language. “We believe that categories for expressing this new orientation to language are expressed in the meta-language and involve concepts which distinguish the form, *what was said*, from the content, *what was meant* or intended by the form” (Torrance & Olson, 1987, p.137).

## 2. STUDY 1 (PENNE 2014)<sup>3</sup>

This qualitative research project was conducted at a lower secondary school in the suburbs of Oslo from 2011-2013. The L1 lessons (Norwegian) were observed<sup>4</sup> in a

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<sup>3</sup> The data are presented in detail in Penne (2014).

<sup>4</sup> In this brief presentation, it will not be possible to go into detail on observational data. What is presented here is discursive structures in the interview data, and there was a correlation between the findings from the two data areas.

class with 24 students during their last two years in lower secondary school. In this class five students (four minority students, one Norwegian) were highly proficient in all subjects, while the others were below average<sup>5</sup>. An important aspect of the data collection was to explore various aspects of discursive differences between these five academically able pupils and the rest of the class: What were the most striking differences in this specific learning context? How did these differences affect their language, their mediating language in the learning process (Gee, 2012, Wertsch et al., 1995, Wertsch 2002)? At the end of the 10th and last school year, 20 students were interviewed (four dropped out of school in the last months of the school year). The interviews focused on learning L1 and being a student in the school setting.

### *2.1 Students with low grades: What did they remember about learning in primary school?*

The first interview questions were about learning in general, more specifically, what the students remembered about "learning" from elementary school. The following are some short, representative extracts from the interview data.

**Kim**

I: How was it being a student in primary school?

K: No, I don't know what to say. There is not much to say, really. It was just normal, as it used to be. I enjoyed playing in the playground. I grew up and walked around in the schoolyard like all the others. ... [There were] boring classes quite often, but that is how it is. It was as it was. (p. 42)<sup>6</sup>.

**Dan**

I: Did you work hard in some of the subjects in primary school?

D: No, no, not at all. There was not much to do in primary school.

I: Did you sometimes worry about the subjects you should learn? That you had to work harder?

D: No, no, not subjects. School was school, sort of. Learning subjects, we started with that in secondary school (p. 42).

**Mariana**

M: I don't remember so much of what we were doing in primary school, actually, but it was cozy. [I] got many friends and very kind teachers (p. 43).

These three students (and the other 12) responded similarly to the question of what they remembered about learning in primary school. They recalled memories about being there, not about learning there or about learning a specific subject. They remembered having fun, being bored, making friends, and encountering

<sup>5</sup> In the following discussion, we distinguish weak and strong students based on term grades.

<sup>6</sup> Page numbers from the Norwegian edition of the study (Kleve, B. Penne, S. & Skaar, 2014).

friendly or irritating teachers, but their memories were not particularly concerned with learning. These students' reflections and answers are mediated by their everyday language, their primary Discourse, not by institutional secondary Discourses that reflect experiences of more institutional aspects of education (Gee, 2012).

### 2.2 *Students with high grades: What did they remember about learning in primary school?*

When asked what being a primary school student was like, the top five students instantly began to talk about learning or, like Samira, about not learning enough. Samira here represents these five students.

#### **Samira**

I: What can you first recall about primary school? Did you look forward to starting there?

S: Yes, I was really looking forward to it, but after a while, I longed back to kindergarten. You know, at my school, there was this age mixture, so the first and second and third classes were together. No, I was not happy with it. So it was very much like this, uh, chaos, simply.

I: So it was difficult to learn, Norwegian, for example?

S: ...Yes..we had kinds of booklets that we were given. ...we were doing different tasks all the time, and I think that was bad. We had, for example, lots of that kind of adjective and noun tasks. That kind of tasks, no one understood. Why did we do it? Yes, I remember we had some grammar booklets. We probably should have learned grammar. I learned nothing. We sat for days with some adjective exercises. Nobody could understand why we were doing it. Later, I really enjoyed grammar. It helps me understand, but at that time, it was a waste. It was not until the 6th and 7th grades, when I changed school that I began to understand things. Then, I finally understood what we were doing (p. 44).

One main difference between Samira and the other four students with high grades and the 15 weaker students was that the strong students, like Samira, immediately accepted their identity a student and acted according to institutional rules (Gee, 2000-2001). They talk about the joy they experienced when they *achieved* something. Samira wanted to learn, but what she remembered was the experience of chaos, the opposite of learning. She is critical of primary school because she did not learn enough.

What Samira might have been unaware of was that she and her classmates likely were exposed to one of the many reform experiments intended to deconstruct school as an institution, as described earlier. This dream about making school more "natural", dissolve school classes and regular classrooms, focusing the individual to be developed and then (according to Dewey) create the democratic ideal society is problematic, as David R. Olson argues on the basis of a Canadian context: "Around such axes the rhetoric of educational reform revolves" (Olson, 2003, p. xi).

### 2.3 *Students with low grades: What did they remember about learning L1 in lower secondary school?*

The next topic in the interviews was learning in lower secondary school. Participants were first asked about learning in the L1 subject (Norwegian), but interviewer also mentioned mathematics in order to stimulate students to reflect on the differences between subjects in a meta-perspective.

#### **Morten about receiving grades<sup>7</sup> for the first time**

I: If we now look back, you did not get grades in primary school. Did you have an idea of what grades you would get, or was it surprising where you landed on the scale in mathematics, for example?

M: No, it was not so fun suddenly to get a 1<sup>8</sup> or so.

I: How did you react?

M: No, what could I do? (p. 48)

#### **Dan about Norwegian and mathematics in lower secondary school**

I: If we compare two textbooks, the textbook for mathematics and the textbook for Norwegian, which one did you like best when you had to learn from them, and why?

D: Eh, don't know. They were just the same, textbooks, sort of.

I: You did not notice any differences?

D: No, they were quite normal, actually.

I: Can you tell me something you have learned about the subject Norwegian in grade 10?

D: Norwegian is the subject I hate most.

I: Why?

D: There is so much to read, so many texts, and it is so irritating that there are so many different things to do, so many texts to write. And, I don't know, it is so difficult to know what they want (p. 49).

#### **Tom about meaningless subjects**

I: Tell me about yourself as a pupil in Norwegian and then mathematics.

T: We have learnt totally unnecessary things in Norwegian. You know, the movie we saw today—I do not think we will make any use of that movie, let's say, in ten years. But to learn how we pronounce words and such things may be useful—foreign words and dialects and such because we may *perhaps* make use of such words. But to watch a movie and write texts about it, there is no meaning in it, and you lose your concentration and... .

I: What about mathematics?

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<sup>7</sup> In Norway, grades are introduced in the eighth grade.

<sup>8</sup> The grading scale runs 6–1, with a score of 6 the highest, and 1 is not passed.



T: It is very similar. You do not need it all. We have to learn the whole book. It's completely meaningless. I lose motivation. I know I might make use of some of it, but I find it so meaningless (p. 52).

Three of the obstacles to learning identified by Twenge (2006, see above) are relevant to interpreting these representative answers from the group of 15 weak students: an identity discourse in the learning culture, the pragmatization of the content in educational activities, and a significant demand for motivating. These obstacles are closely interrelated. First, it is quite striking that none of these 15 students were part of an institutional school discourse. Their student identity was not developed (Gee 2000–2001). They did not play the game that their institution requires. They wanted to choose what to do and what to read. They defended their individual freedom but could do very little to improve their low grades: “No, what could I do?” Morten concludes, and “It is so difficult to know what they want,” Dan laments.

#### 2.4 A different story: What did the five strong students remember about learning in lower secondary school?

##### Tan

I: What was good or bad about your mathematics textbook?

T: The good thing is that they have the summary and then the rules and the examples. This makes it much easier to understand. And, as I said, the summary is very important when I prepare for tests and examination. I use it a lot. It makes it easier.

I: If we compare this with the Norwegian textbook?

T: (Laughing) It has no summary...because it is a totally different subject and if I have to solve problems and find solutions in Norwegian, I cannot use rules to find out what lies behind. And if I lose a point, I have to read it again and perhaps interpret the text more closely (p. 58).

##### Samira

S: Reading fiction in Norwegian makes me understand things in new ways. I think you are able to see new contexts when you read literary texts that would be difficult to understand otherwise. And there is something I have been thinking a lot about these last months, and that is that the more you learn at school, or learn more generally, the more such contexts you see. It is fun because you see that your thoughts and experiences are related to each other. After having read about Ibsen in Norwegian, there was suddenly a page about Ibsen in the religion textbook. Had I not learnt about it before I would not have noticed it, but because we had about Ibsen in Norwegian, I saw the relation to religion and ethics in the 19th century. I just experienced something similar in mathematics and natural science. It gives me a good feeling, and it has happened quite often now in 10th grade (p. 57).

Tan and Samira stand as representatives of the group of five strong students. Their responses are on a meta-level. They reflect on learning, as they were asked, and their reflections are adapted to the role of being a student in 10th grade. As a student, Tan reflects both within a mathematic discourse and a hermeneutic discourse

(Norwegian), two subjects which represent different approaches and ways of thinking. Tan explains here on a meta-level the difference between what Bruner (1986) calls the paradigmatic and syntagmatic modes of thought (Penne, 2010; Kleve & Penne, 2012). To achieve good grades or a literacy perspective on learning, Tan has identified the contextual understanding of a school.

### 3. STUDY 1 SUMMARIZED

All these students have experienced an open, individualized school based on a liberation philosophy with strong appeal (Bruner, 1996; Gee, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The focus on “the active student” has made the belief in the free individual vital. In these qualitative data we see that the open and natural methods pose problems for weak students. Being an active student is a matter of identity and discourse (Gee, 2012). Outside the institutional logic and discourse of schools, mediated by students’ everyday discourse, there are few prompts to read textbooks (Twenge, 2006). Students with low grades remembered primary school as a positive place for building good relations but recalled the transition to secondary school as dramatic. As one student stated, “it is so difficult to know what they want.” Stronger students said that among the most important things they learned in primary school were to be a student and follow the routines of homework and other activities that schools require (Penne, 2014, p. 59).

Amy B.M. Tsui (2012) argues that “ethnographic studies have provided immensely rich insights into classroom discourse as a mediational tool, not only for learning but also for the negotiation and (co)-construction of identity, power, and social relationships” (p. 393). Study 1 documents that, through this mediating language, students’ meta-level thinking, interpretation, and analytical skills are created—in other words, the means to succeed in school. Teaching which emphasizes individual actions and students’ responsibility for their own learning works well with motivated students but, for many other students, only reinforces already established differences (Bakken & Elstad, 2012).

### 4. STUDY 2 (SKARSTEIN, 2013)

The dissertation *Meaning making and diversity—a didactic study of students’ reading of fictional texts* (Skarstein, 2013) examined 21 upper secondary students’ discourses on fictional texts presented in an L1 classroom. The study highlighted prominent differences in weak and strong students’ approaches to fictional texts. Both students’ interpretation of the texts and the language used in their discourse were considered—*what* was said and *how* it was said.

This study found the same pattern as Penne’s study in a lower secondary school: two different identity discourses (Twenge, 2006). The study showed the effect of these two discourses on learning in L1 and L1 instruction’s potential to develop language as a mediational tool through the study of texts. To understand

and reflect on school subjects, students have to switch from the everyday language and primary discourse to what Gee (2012) calls secondary Discourses. Making this switch requires the ability to integrate reflections, interpretations, and the abstract thinking expressed through meta-language. The following extract gives an example of the inability to do so. Frederic, an 18-year-old student, discussed the L1/Norwegian subject.

**Frederic**

I: Why would you grade Norwegian a 4 out of 6?

F: Because it is ... I don't know. Hehe, I think it is fun during the lessons, at least the ones we have with the class. But ... yes, I don't know, but maybe the subject in itself isn't that fun. The class makes it fun.

I: In which way does the class make it fun?

F: That we can joke with each other, like in the middle of a sentence, that they don't mind if a person says something wrong. That makes it a bit fun for the others. It isn't like we laugh at the person, but that .... For example, when we had about the old Norse language some time ago, we were supposed to read it in old Norse, and then the next person should read it in modern language, and then Silje started in Old Norse, and Jonas thought it was in Old Norse again, but it should have been in modern Norwegian, and then he started reading with that funny R, and we started to laugh because he didn't understand. Things like that are really fun, and the teacher Frode finds it totally acceptable, actually. That was kind of funny, and that's what makes it fun during the lessons (p. 182)<sup>9</sup>.

Frederic's main criterion for evaluating L1 instruction was "fun" or "not fun." This language mediated thinking that links the individual to the world through emotions, and his evaluation was based on the everyday values of feelings and intimacy. In this primary discourse, subject content can be valuable only if it matches and confirms what the student already thinks and feels. This attitude is further illuminated by Frederic's approach to a Ludvig Holberg novel he read in school.

**Frederic's account of a novel**

I: Do you remember the text you read, about Niels Klim, by Holberg, about the man that traveled and fell down into the earth and came down to that Cocklecu country?

F: Yeah, where everything was turned upside down.

I: Yes, what did you think was the most important thing about that text?

F: What was most important?

I: Yes.

F: Well, I don't know. I just thought it was awkward to read it, 'cause I'm used to men being the strict ones, like they have been always. And that the women were shouting at the man, and that he stood and did the dishes at home, was whipped by the woman ... I just felt it was wrong.

I: Yes, wrong. In what way?

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<sup>9</sup> Page numbers from the Norwegian edition of the dissertation (Skarstein 2013)

F: It's not how it is supposed to be, I feel (p. 266).

This quote shows the danger of L1 instruction's closeness to our everyday language. Frederic approached the text using the same emotional and antithetical language as he approached the subject of Norwegian. Here, the descriptions made are "awkward" and "wrong." Frederic's discourse presented no arguments, explanations, hypotheses, or questions about the text. His evaluation was justified on the grounds of what he "means" or "feels." Neither the historical context nor the writer's possible intentions or the institutional context in which the text is read was taken into account. No discourses were discussed or contrasted on a meta-level (Gee, 2012). The only context that gives meaning to the text was a strong identity discourse: Frederic's own here and now. He took his emotional reaction to the text as his point of departure and made generalizations on that basis. Problematically, nothing new is learned from this position. This experience is representative of students who approach school and academic content through an affinity language, which is associated with low grades.

As in Penne's (2014) study on lower secondary students, upper secondary students who predominantly mediate affinity have a weak institutional identity. They rarely reflect on what they do in school or why adults have decided that they should go there. For instance, their answers to why they should read fictional texts are often tautological: "You are supposed to read fictional text in school because that is what you are supposed to do in school/because you have to know this for your finals." Such reasoning is not found among student discourses that are predominantly meta-discourses.

In other words, their school discourse is the same as students' everyday discourse, the discourse used in any social setting. In these students' accounts, school does not appear as an arena for learning but, instead, as a social arena. These students do not recognize the value system that the school as an institution implies. A striking gap lies between Frederic's language and student identity and the purpose of his presence in school. In addition to his emotional language, Frederic needs a language that mediates the L1 subjects' hermeneutic discourse frames. The study suggested that, for a large group of the informants, their language was not a mediational tool for further learning. They lacked an attitude that would allow them to be changed or transformed (Wertsch et al., 1995).

Jon gave an example of a student discourse that included mediational means for learning. He talked about the same text as Frederic.

**Jon's account of a novel**

I: Can you tell me a little bit about the excerpt?

J: Yes, Niels Klim is—well, I don't remember what he was, but that is not important for the story. Anyway, he goes for an expedition up nearby Rothaugen. And then he falls down in a hole in the ground there, and then he comes to a new world that isn't big, with different countries. And in these different countries live different peoples, but they are trees and bushes. And they have a totally different society and government and norms and rules than the ones that exist here—at that time I mean, among other

things, the gender roles, especially. I think ... yes, in Cocklecu, it was the gender roles that were turned upside down. The men are in the kitchen cleaning, and the women are in the leading positions. So, yes, it is a satirical text that criticizes how things were in Norway at that time and the rest of the world.

I: Yes, what is it a satire of?

J: Yea, of criticizing and turning upside down things as they are at that time, how women belong in the kitchen and "that how it's supposed to be" and that they are not born to occupy higher positions (p. 178).

Jon remembered and could give an accurate account of the story and the setting of the events, but even more important is the way this was said. Jon "played the school game" and adjusted his language to the school context in which his account was given: Although he knew that the interviewer had read the excerpt, he presented all the background information he thought necessary to understand the plot. By presenting the plot, he could determine the genre of the text, and when asked to specify the genre, he did so by pointing to values and norms of the historical context in which the text was written. Jon's account displays a student aware of both the (school) genre of literary interpretations, and the (school) context in which he was interviewed.

The most important difference between Frederic's and Jon's presentations of the Holberg-text is that Jon could discuss the text without talking about himself. In Jon's account, the text remained a secondary Discourse that included several contexts. Jon mediated the historical context, the author's intentions, and the effect the text had when it was published. Frederic did not seem able to do the same. Instead, his attitude and language revealed a lack of openness to new or unfamiliar secondary Discourses. The problematic effect of the strong emphasis on the individual student seems evident in Frederic's discourse. After 12 years of education in a student-oriented school, his identity discourse limited the potential of meaning in texts to such an extent that his account included no other context than his own here and now.

## 5. STUDY 2 SUMMARIZED

While students such as Frederic approach subjects and academic contents with a language that mediates affinity, intimacy, and feelings, students such as Jon can use different contexts and secondary Discourses that acquire meaning from texts. The data reveal the consequences of the lack of mediated action in Norwegian L1 classrooms. It seems evident here that, instead of assuming that the individual alone is the agent of action, student identity can be understood more accurately as an "individual operating with mediational means" (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 64). Mediated action involves a tension between the mediating tools and the individuals who use these tools. Interpretation and hermeneutic understanding arise only when they include meta-thinking.

Students with a rich meta-language can create versions of the world: They explain and interpret the texts with which they have to work in school, especially in the L1 subject. These students use arguments, explanations, examples, and generalizations based in a variety of contexts. This language effectively transfers power from social institutions to the individual (Olson, 2003). Such textual power is much less likely to be gained when one uses a language that mediates feelings and affinity. Meta-language, therefore, should be regarded as a powerful symbolic system, a system that L1 teachers have a particular responsibility to develop in order to create equal opportunities for all pupils in school. Students such as Frederic have not learned how to use this empowering language; instead, they seem to have been allowed to meet institutional demands without going beyond their everyday discourse.

#### 6. STUDY 3: (ELF & KASPERSEN (ED.), 2012)

The final study discussed here was part of a Scandinavian collaborative project, published in Elf & Kaspersen (ed.) (2012). Three Norwegian, two Swedish, and three Danish researchers investigated the following issues: Is there still a Scandinavian educational culture, and if so, what are the specific features of this culture? An additional question posed in the context of this article is whether we can determine how Scandinavian teachers in these studies interpreted student orientation as a didactic method and whether they had made active efforts to assist weaker students in their learning processes. The book presents 8 sub-studies, all based on 27 interviews with L1 teachers in upper secondary school in these three countries.

All the interviewed teachers were clearly influenced by the changing times and the increasingly challenging working conditions for teachers. We also see possible differences between younger and older teachers: The younger teachers were more practical and pragmatic, whereas the older had greater personal commitment (Kaspersen, 2012). Many teachers' institutional identities, especially those of the oldest teachers, had been greatly shaped by traditions that accept government control and objectives, including the equalization of social differences. These teachers were deeply concerned about their students' welfare.

A recurring pattern in the presented interview data indicates that strong and eager students are given high levels of support. Many teachers with motivated students can maintain the traditional student-oriented perspective without losing focus on educational goals (Penne, 2012). The teaching methods these teachers described and commented on are based on professional didactic reasoning, although the students often react to them with a certain degree of opposition (Krogh, Penne & Ulfgard, 2012; Krogh, 2012).

We see, fairly consistently, that, when the majority of students in a classroom are unmotivated or academically weak, didactic reasoning and goals tend to fail. Educational instruction loses its professional dimension and becomes more relaxed and pleasant in order to enhance the students' sense of contentment and wel-

being. Consider this example from a young Swedish high school teacher who had a challenging class with many unmotivated students.

T: We have a room with comfortable chairs and cozy lamps that we turn off. It is in fact quite lovely. And as for the books, my plan was for them to read aloud, but that ended with them not understanding anything because they read with so little fluency. They can't, they don't understand what they read. They didn't have the right stress on the syllables or the right melody, not even to mark a full stop. So, after a while, I felt it was better that I read, and they read sometimes (p. 49)<sup>10</sup>.

The students did not read well, so the teacher read for them. To make the learning experience even more enjoyable, the class gathered in a room designed for students' wellbeing. The teacher selects texts on topics she thought reflected students' social environment.

T: And then I chose texts we found in the newspaper. It was an Arabic girl who had written that book about make-up and cars, or what it was called—about her life, a success story. I thought, my intention was to strengthen these girls some. That was the idea. And we read articles about criminal gangs when that was all over the papers this autumn and about honor-related violence.

I: It really sounds like you are focusing on questions that concern the students personally and that one can believe are related to them.

T: Yes, I think it is important ... it is something that they can relate to (p. 232).

The texts this teacher presented to her students were not secondary Discourses (Gee, 2012) but were meant to engage the students by mirroring their assumed social identity. In a learning situation, the problem seldom is that teachers are insufficiently aware of students' identity (Ziehe, 2007). Rather, the problem occurs when the pedagogic strategy is to follow the identity discourse, ignoring the need to challenge students' prior understanding. This teacher gave reasons for her choices; she used the strategy she learned as a teacher student: "It is what we have talked about all the time during the teaching training: to make a connection to the students' own experiences. So I always try to do that" (p. 49).

This example shows how the more liberated, student-oriented traditions of the Scandinavian classrooms can turn into an exclusive focus on care and concern. This emphasis is what teachers learn at teaching colleges, the teacher says. However, under this strategy, weaker students who need a teacher are not systematically assisted in their further development.

## 7. DEMOCRATIC POLICY WITH UNDEMOCRATIC EFFECTS? SUMMING UP THE THREE STUDIES

The Norwegian pedagogue Erling Lars Dale (2010) identified a persistent and seemingly unsolvable conflict in what he calls "the Norwegian curriculum code": Does knowledge come from curricula, specific subject areas, and skilled teachers, or do

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<sup>10</sup> Page numbers from the Scandinavian edition (Elf & Kaspersen 2012).

active students construct their own knowledge in the student-oriented school? This dilemma has not diminished in our increasingly individualized culture. According to Foros & Vetlesen, (2012) the individual's freedom to act, constructed through the democratic processes of schools, education, and the general governing processes, is being transformed "from [a] public good to [a] private good" (p. 356).

Based on the research presented here, we may conclude that the dilemma identified by Dale, "the Norwegian curriculum code", has not been resolved. In the above presented three studies a recurrent pattern becomes clear. There is a constant level of tension between the L1 subject, with its accompanying educational requirements, and the teaching profession's emphasis on individual, student-oriented development. Due to its closeness to everyday language and culture, the L1 subject is especially vulnerable to young students' identity construction (Gee, 2012; Wertsch et al., 1995, Wertsch 2002; Bruner 1986, 1990, 1996; Ziehe, 2007). When teachers find themselves in demanding situations with unmotivated students, the profession's focus on individual development and professional didactic arguments tends to fail (Penne, 2012). Then students without a required pre-understanding are not actively taught how to be a learning student. At the same time there is every indication that motivated students benefit from the freedom offered in the student-oriented Scandinavian school (Bakken & Elstad, 2012). They have a presupposition or pre-understanding that provides meaning and understanding of the subjects and texts presented in the classroom. Therefore, it appears that the democratic emphasis on equality can unintentionally contribute to inequality.

As these studies show, the importance of language as mediating tool in any learning context should be at the center of the classroom. All students should be given access to knowledge in the subjects, mediated by the necessary subject discourses and language. The L1 teacher has a particular responsibility to develop young students' ability to encounter the world, institutions, and academic content through other discourses than their everyday discourse. Meta-language should be regarded as a powerful symbolic system. We live, however, in a time and a culture where such demands are not made or encouraged. Further research and the didactic development of this field should mark the next phase of the Norwegian school system.

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