

Short Communication

# Sustainable Development Work Aimed at Promoting Mental Health among Municipal Adult Students with Mental Health Problems

Ulla Damber\* and Lena Randevåg

Department of Education, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

## Abstract

The present study focuses on students and teachers in Swedish Municipal Adult Education, in a project aimed at helping students with diagnoses within the neuropsychiatric spectrum. The project aimed to support students to complete their studies for further higher education. As this is an overlooked group of students research results provide insights into students' views on the project and conclusions regarding the sustainability of school development. In this qualitative study, five teachers and four students were observed and in-depth interviewed. Data were analyzed through inductive content analysis. Authentic relations between students and teachers, signified by mutual trust, proved important. As the teachers themselves had originated the ideas guiding the project, the development work had good prior conditions for further sustainable development. We conclude that autonomous teachers, who set up joint goals and provide individualized support for these students, enable academic success when flexibility, relations, and self-esteem characterize the work.

## Introduction

The objective of this study was to investigate the factors that promote sustainable school development in Swedish Municipal Adult Education, which is aimed at students who have left upper secondary school without completing grades and a diploma enabling them to apply to higher education. Only a very small number of studies focus on this target group, thus, this study contributes to the field, in particular, while making use of students' own voices in a qualitative study as we studied students' views on the extra support provided within the project.

According to Swedish statistics, every fourth student in municipal adult education leaves their studies without a diploma, and these students, with various functional variations, face problems such as mental health issues, school fatigue, and learning difficulties that contribute to their academic failure [1]. To break the pattern of academic failure, mental health is of utmost importance for the students, as well as experiencing success in their studies. In a two-year project called "Dare to Study Again," special arrangements were made to aid this target group in fulfilling their academic aims. Apart from ordinary work in the classroom, these four teachers offered clarifications of assignments, alternative examination

forms, and general support to understand reading materials. This support was offered in the teachers' offices following a flexible schedule based on the students' requests. The study focused on students' views of the program and contextual factors contributing to the program's success [2]. Within the scope of the development work, four teachers focused on the target group and were given the freedom to arrange support for the students based on their preferences. Two research questions guided the study:

- What success factors did students experience?
- What contextual factors contributed to successful and sustainable school development?

The theoretical framework was twofold. Firstly, regarding teachers' choices of didactic tools, we adhere to Ericsson et al. [3], who propose a perspective of negotiation, where discussions are carried out between students, teachers, and study counselors about the best way to arrange the studies based on the student's individual preferences and past experiences, aiming to break the negative spiral many of the students have experienced. Interaction between students and teachers becomes a crucial factor in creating meaning in the studies, and such communicative opportunities are created

## More Information

\*Address for correspondence: Ulla Damber, Department of Education, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden, Email: Ulla.Damber@miun.se

Submitted: July 07, 2023

Approved: August 04, 2023

Published: August 07, 2023

How to cite this article: Damber U, Randevåg L. Sustainable Development Work Aimed at Promoting Mental Health among Municipal Adult Students with Mental Health Problems. Insights Depress Anxiety. 2023; 7: 016-017.

DOI: 10.29328/journal.ida.1001037

Copyright license: © 2023 Damber U, et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.





[4]. Secondly, theories on school development are part of the theoretical framework, as many projects are completed without sustainable effects. According to Fred [5], projects often rely on resources, such as extra personnel or money, that do not exist in ordinary practice. Therefore, the end of a project often means the end of the extra activities carried out during the project. Lack of adequate linkages to the needs experienced by the teachers involved in the work and their needs [6] and insufficient cooperation and interaction among the actors involved are believed to support sustainable development [7].

## Methodology

Five students and the four teachers who took part in the project were selected for interviews and observations. The targeted students had earlier been diagnosed within the neuropsychiatric spectrum by a medical doctor or a psychologist, with mental health issues as a result. The study was carried out in two steps. Firstly, interviews with the students, together with field notes from visits to the practice, were analyzed through inductive content analysis [8]. Secondly, the progression of school development was analyzed through comparisons between the outcomes of the present study and earlier studies we have been engaged in regarding sustainable school development [6].

Eight observations (2-3 hrs. long) entailing meetings with students and staff, together with five interviews with students (45 - 60 min.), provided empirical data, all collected strictly following the ethical considerations prescribed by the Swedish Research Council [1], such as The process of analysis included coding, categorization, creation of themes, and supplementary analysis of field notes and observations [8]. The conclusions from this procedure were then compared to earlier results and research regarding sustainable school development. The results indicate that adequate support was characterized by flexibility, structure, and accessibility, according to the students.

## Results and Discussion

Three themes stood out in response to the first research question. Firstly, clear structure and flexibility served the students' purpose of achieving their study goals, with clarity regarding the times, locations, and available support, either in person or via text or e-mail. The flexibility allowed the students to influence their study plan, which was jointly set up, including the individual target picture. Additionally, the planning of time became flexible as students themselves decided when to get in contact with their teacher. Secondly, accessibility to individual teacher support was seen as a success factor, as students never needed to feel that they were on their own in their studies. Compared to traditional teaching,

no time had to be spent in class, but even when studying alone, the teacher was accessible at arranged times so that questions never went unanswered and individual needs could be met. Thirdly, authentic relations stood out in the data. This points to the importance of the teacher as a fellow human that could be trusted, or as one student put it: "I can be who I am while I study." The relationship emanating trust was also mutual, as the teachers' trust in their students left students with self-confidence.

Regarding contextual factors that influenced the success of this development work, teacher autonomy guaranteed that changes in teaching were based on perceived needs, closely anchored in the local context, instead of a ready-made agenda imposed on the teachers. Secondly, an adaptation of support was built-in, as the agenda was tailored to each student and never seen as the only solution but open for flexibility and further change. As the teachers themselves had originated this development work and had joint visions, the small number of dedicated teachers involved enabled constant interaction and mutual support to strive for those goals.

## Conclusion

Our conclusions are that autonomous teachers, given the freedom to set up joint goals and provide highly individualized support for this target group, enable academic success when flexibility, real relations, and self-esteem guide both teachers and students.

## References

1. Swedish Bureau of Statistics, SCB. (2017). Education and work: Young outside? Results for 90 talented students who have not completed upper secondary education (Theme Report No. 4).
2. Randevåg L, Boström L. Completing Studies in Alternative Ways in Adult Education. 'Who has told me that I cannot. *Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. 2019; 18(4). <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.17.4.x>
3. Eriksson L, Larsson S, Sijos Zackrisson K. How is the education of adults really formed? In IM. Abrant Dahlgren & I Carlsson (Eds.), *Learning in adults way*. 2012; 79–99.
4. Assarsson L, Sijos Zackrisson K. Adult study meetings: About teaching and participant identities. In IS. Larsson & LE Olsson (Eds.). *About adults 'studies*. 2006; 135-161.
5. Fred M. *Projectification: The Trojan horse of local government*. Diss. Lunds Universitet, 2018. Lund.
6. Damber U, Hermansson C, Andersson B, Jendis M. Factors Promoting and Obstructing a School Development Project. *Education Inquiry*. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1929751>
7. Langelotz L. Collegial learning in practice: Development of competence or collegial correction?. *Nature and Culture*.
8. Graneheim UH, Lundman B. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Educ Today*. 2004 Feb;24(2):105-12. doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001. PMID: 14769454.