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Influence, Responsibility & Awareness
– Teachers’ and Students’ Attitudes and Experiences

Inflytande, ansvar & medvetenhet
– lärares och elevers attityder och erfarenheter

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ABSTRACT

In this degree project the concepts of student democracy, student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness are discussed. This has been done in connection to the learner autonomy movement in Sweden and the steering documents at a secondary school level. Our study concerns some teachers’ and students’ attitudes to and experiences of working with these issues in school. We came to the conclusion that the teachers that we interviewed are very aware of what the steering documents say and try to incorporate these essential parts in their teaching. We also found that the students are not at all aware of the concepts and ideas presented in the steering documents in the same way as the teachers are. Also, the teachers’ and the students’ understanding of these terms differ, something that may lead to a misunderstanding and make it hard to discuss matters connected to student democracy and learner autonomy. A lot of work has to be done in schools in order to make the students more aware and to encourage them to take more responsibility for their learning.

Key words: student democracy, student influence, learner responsibility, learner awareness and learner autonomy
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7
INTRODUCTION

Background

Student democracy is a core value in the Swedish Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, *Lpo 94*. It is also fundamental for a functioning democratic society.

For us as future teachers it is important to have an understanding of what student democracy is and how it can be implemented into the learning environment. During our teaching practise we have seen that it is not as easy as one could wish to apply the ideals of student democracy in the teaching.

The ideas connected to student democracy and student responsibility are by no means new. Already in the 17th century the Czech theologian and pedagogue Comenius promoted a democratic thinking and an education that took into account each child’s individual needs. A century later, Rousseau promoted his thoughts about child-raising and education, stressing the fact that all children should be allowed to develop freely in accordance to their nature. Yet another century later the American pedagogue John Dewey developed his theories about individualised learning (Rebenius, 1998). Today, these ideas and influences are found in *Lpo 94* where it is clearly stated that the students are to “exercise real influence over their education” (*Lpo 94*, p. 13).
But just because student influence is stated in a steering document, there is no guarantee that it is practised in schools. Some teachers integrate student influence in their teaching to some extent, but according to a survey made by Malmö City, this is not something that is done in the everyday teaching (Pettersson, 2008).

In the discussion about student democracy we also want to include the concepts of student influence and learner awareness. We believe that the teachers’ attitudes towards and experiences of these three concepts are decisive for how much effort they put into working towards a more individualised learning environment where students are given real influence. One can also assume that the students’ attitudes towards and understanding of student democracy are of significance. If they have a positive attitude and see the point of being given learner responsibility, it is likely that student democracy takes on a real meaning in the language classroom. This is why we have placed the focus on teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards and experiences of student democracy.

Furthermore, we believe that students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards student influence will vary. The teachers are obliged to give students real influence, but many students do not seem to be capable of or interested in taking responsibility for their learning. We also believe that students’ and teachers’ views on student influence will depend on their previous experiences of student democracy. Also, when working with student influence and implementing a more individualised learning environment in the classroom, the teacher’s role is different from that of a traditional classroom. Instead of using a traditional teacher-centred approach, a learner-centred pedagogy is used. What and how to learn becomes the basic focuses in the development of the self-directed learner (Eriksson quoted in Tholin, 1992, p. 23).

In Språk för livet, idébok i språkdidaktik Rigmor Eriksson and Annsofi Jacobsson (2001) offer explanations to why some teachers choose not to implement student democracy in their classrooms. They point to negative student reactions, negative attitudes among colleagues towards including the students in the planning process and a lack of role models and concrete examples of what it actually means to work with student democracy.
Aim and research questions

Our aim with this degree project is to get an insight into students’ and teachers’ experiences of student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness and their attitudes towards it. In the parts of the syllabus for English for the compulsory school where student democracy and learning are addressed, it is stated that pupils should:

- be able to reflect over and draw conclusions about their way of learning English,
- be able to choose and use aids when reading texts, writing and in other language activities,
- be able, on their own and together with others, to plan and carry out work tasks as well as draw conclusions from their work.

In order to investigate this we interviewed a group of year nine students at school A. Thereafter we interviewed a teacher at School A, Teacher A, who works in a rather traditional way. We also interviewed a teacher in an adjacent municipality, Teacher B, who has a reputation of working with learner autonomy and student influence to a high extent.

With regards to what is stated about student democracy and learning in the steering documents, our main questions are:

1. What are the students’ attitudes towards and thoughts about student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness?
2. What are the students’ experiences of working with student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness in the classroom?
3. What are the teachers’ attitudes towards and thoughts about student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness?
4. What are the teachers’ experiences of student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness in the English classroom?

The central concepts that we use need explaining. They are progressivism, student democracy, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, student influence, learner awareness and learner responsibility. These are presented and defined below.
Key concepts

Progressivism

John Dewey’s thoughts about education and the importance of caring for the individual’s needs are visible in the present Swedish curriculum. In the article “John Dewey – reformpedagog för vår tid?”, Gunnar Sundgren (2005) describes how Dewey’s pedagogical progressivism involves thoughts on how the educational process in a democratic society should support the students’ education towards becoming “reflective practitioners” (p. 97). In his major work Democracy and Education (1916), Dewey claims that democracy cannot be excluded from the school’s premises since one of its major tasks is to help the students to become independent individuals (Sundgren, 2005, p. 95).

A central starting-point in Dewey’s pedagogical philosophy is that the child is born as a social being that should be included in the society from the very beginning. Therefore, the school, the society and the individual – both adult and child – have to co-operate in order to reach pedagogical success. The student has to be involved in planning his or her own education, and it has to be fun, interesting and meaningful in order to nurture the individual’s needs. The teacher has to know what the student’s world of today is like, not how it was twenty years ago (p. 80). According to this model education should be “concerned with the development of understanding, not just the passive reception of ‘knowledge’ or the acquisition of specific skills. The goals of education are not defined in terms of particular ends or products, but in terms of the processes and procedures by which the individual develops understanding and awareness and creates possibilities for future learning” (Finney, 2002, p. 73).

A progressive approach moves away from the traditional teacher-centred classroom towards a learner-centred classroom, where the teacher is a supervisor and supports his or her students individually. The classroom should be a place for social training where the learners should be given the possibility to take an active part in their learning in connection to what is stated in the national curriculum. However, it is difficult to work towards general goals in a school that is supposed to be individualised since every person is unique in their knowledge and development. Sundgren argues that ”[p]edagogikens främsta uppgift är att utveckla människors förmåga att ställa upp mål för det egna handlandet, att söka medlen för dessa måls förverkligande och att kunna bedöma konsekvenserna av en medveten handling” [“pedagogy’s premier assignment is to develop people’s ability to set goals for their own actions, to seek the means for these goals’ realisation and to judge the consequences of a
deliberate action”] (Sundgren, 2005, p. 96). According to Dewey the school cannot isolate itself from the society; it has to become a “society in miniature” dealing with the motives and the conditions that are included in a society (p. 84f).

Some criticism has been directed towards progressivism in that “it rests on concepts of learner needs, interests and development processes and is thus open to the criticism of subjectivity in the definition of these concepts” and it is claimed that the progressivism model is less attractive “for large-scale curriculum development and planning related to government trends in the West towards vocational training to meet employment needs” (Finney, 2002, p. 73).

**Student democracy**

As a consequence of the pedagogical ideas promoted by progressivism, that democracy should be applied in the teaching and learning process, student democracy is included in the steering documents for the school system. In *the Curriculum for Compulsory School*, for example, it is stated that:

> [t]he democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should embrace all pupils. Development of all pupils’ knowledge and social awareness requires that they take increasingly greater responsibility for their own work […] and that they are also able to exercise real influence over their education. According to the Education Act, it is incumbent on all who work in the school to work for democratic working structures. (*Lpo 94*)

Further, it is stated that the pupils should “gradually exercise increasingly greater influence over their education” and “have an understanding of democratic principles and develop their ability to work in democratic forms.” Also, the teacher “should […] ensure that all students […] have true influence over the work methods, work structures, and educational content, and ensure that this influence increases as they grow in age and maturity.”

**Learner autonomy**

Learner autonomy was originally developed with the language classroom in mind and its ideological ideas are based on Dewey’s educational thinking. Autonomy refers to the process that enables learners to recognise and assess their own needs, the willingness and capability to take responsibility for one’s own learning actions in order to provide for one’s own needs, but
also the ability to put into use in “real life” the skills acquired in school (Rebenius, 1998, p. 27 and Peñaflorida, 2002, p. 346).

Since it is not possible to predict all the needs of learners, language courses “must seek … to prepare them to deal independently with the language they encounter as they move into new situations” (Crawford, 2002, p. 86). When working with learner autonomy the goal for language teaching and learning is that the students should develop their language competence and self esteem so that they dare to use the target language on their own. The goal is also to support the development of good democratic citizens. By using ways of working that place the students’ ability to practice their democratic rights in focus, schools contribute to empower the students (Lundahl, 2009, p. 99f).

In the article “Elevplanerad språkundervisning för 2000-talet – några personliga reflektioner” Jörgen Tholin summarizes what distinguishes the Swedish learner autonomy movement:

Learner autonomy i svensk kontext har framför allt kommit att handla om tre aspekter: att successivt låta eleverna ta ett allt större ansvar för sin egen inlärning, att få eleverna att reflektera över hur de lär sig så att de efter hand kan göra alltmer medvetna val och att träna eleverna i att se sitt lärande i ett socialt sammanhang så att de lär sig att samarbeta med andra och inte bara ta ansvar för sig själva.

[Learner autonomy in a Swedish context has foremost dealt with three aspects: successively letting the students take more responsibility over their own learning, getting the students to reflect over how they learn so that they can make deliberate choices and training them to see their learning in a social context so that they learn to cooperate with others and not just taking responsibility for themselves.] (2001, p. 214)

According to Tholin, progressivist pedagogy and learner autonomy are often misunderstood. Dewey was critical towards many of his followers in the progressive pedagogical movement since he felt that they had a tendency to hand over too much of the pedagogical responsibility for the learning to the students (Sundgren, 2005, p. 94)

In Att lära sig lära – engelska. Om elevplanerad undervisning Tholin (1992) presents learner autonomy and its way into the Swedish school. It all started with Henri Holec at Nancy University in France who expressed learner autonomy-based ideas already during the early 1970s. He promoted a classroom where the learner’s responsibility for his or her learning is based on five criteria: fulfilling the objectives, defining the content and progressions,
selecting the method and techniques to be used, monitoring the acquisition procedure and
evaluating what has been acquired. Although his concern is English for adult learners that are
motivated to learn, his way of thinking influenced the development of student planned
education in Swedish schools (Tholin, 1992, p. 17).

In the late 1970s, John Trim introduced learner autonomy as an approach to learning, and in
the 1980s more specifically into language education. This meant a development towards a
communicative language education and the fact that education should be based upon the
students’ needs and conditions in order to motivate them to learn in an efficient way. He
motivated this way of working as important because all learners are at different levels or
different steps on the “language ladder” (p. 15). According to Trim, the solution to
heterogeneous groups is to make the students responsible for their own learning. This has to
be done gradually and in connection to making them aware of their own learning. Trim also
claimed that language learning is a life-long process and that the school has to provide its
students with the tools and experiences that enable them to learn on their own.

Alongside with learner autonomy, different forms of it has developed. In Europe an approach
called “Learning to learn” was developed during the same time as learner autonomy. The key
concept here was awareness. The difference is that this approach is more generally used for
all learning, not only language learning (p. 16).

Tholin (1992) also presents Rigmor Eriksson’s basic principles for learner autonomy. For
some teachers it feels overwhelming and too time consuming to engage in learner autonomy.
Eriksson has therefore provided a system of “pieces” where teachers are free to pick and
choose the parts they want to include in their teaching in order to move towards a learner
centred classroom. Hence, interested teachers can choose to dramatically change all their
teaching or just some parts of it.

Eriksson has also identified two levels of learner autonomy: the lower, practical level, with
concrete changes in the classroom and a higher level, concerning the students taking part in
their learning. According to Tholin the changes should be made in sequences, in order to
prepare oneself for the next step, starting with classroom changes and moving on to the
students’ attitudes and changes in the roles of the teacher and the students (Tholin, 1992, p.
23).

Many of the Swedish promoters of and researchers in the field of learner autonomy prefer the
term “self-directed learning” when talking about a learning and teaching situation where
autonomous and self-reliant learners are the goal. Originally, these terms had slightly different meanings, but are today used synonymously (Rebenius, 1998, p. 25). Rebenius points out that self-directed learning is not synonymous to individualisation. Even though both approaches take into consideration the uniqueness of each student, individualised teaching, as opposed to self-directed learning, is still dependent on the teacher who is the one to make all the decisions, while the student remains passive (p. 30). Self-directed learning first evolved in the 1980s from the Council of Europe’s work on communicative language teaching (p. 26) and the term was first used in the report *Autonomy and self-directed learning* written by the Council in 1988 (p. 31).

**Student influence**

Many student surveys have been carried out in the field of student influence asking how or to what extent the students have any real influence over their education. Most of the reports have come to a disheartening result: schools do not reach the requirements of student influence set by the steering documents. However in “Vad är elevinflytande? – Elevinflytandets många ansikten, en fråga om makt” (Skolverket 2008), Eva Forsberg asserts that such claims are partly wrong. It is necessary to define what we mean by student influence and how we choose to examine it. It is also crucial to widen the meaning of student influence.

According to Forsberg, there are two types of student influence dealing with the power to affect and in what situations and relations influence is carried out. The first type of influence concerns power related to dominance and the solving of conflicts. The second type looks at influence as an interplay where teachers and students work together towards a common goal. The student is in this case a co-producer of what is carried out in the classroom. Here the key question concerns to what extent the student benefits from student influence or not (Skolverket, 2008).

Forsberg further claims that we have to seek the answers to what will benefit the learner in the concepts of interest. She presents three types of interests: the subjective, the objective and the formative. Subjective interest includes the student’s notions of what they want to learn where as objective interest deals with what is best for the learner from an outside perspective. Formative interest is about creating an interest within the learner instead of focusing on the content. According to Forsberg, formative interest should be placed in focus in schools, answering questions concerning what the student benefits from or not. This is because the subjective and the objective interest have certain drawbacks when it comes to deciding what
is best for the individual or how to formulate the interest. In addition, it is difficult to decide what is best for someone else. Forsberg draws the conclusion that “elevinflytande i form av ett samspel och en process där eleven ges möjlighet att formulera och under gång omformulera sina subjektiva intressen är det som kännetecknar ett positivt inflytande” [“student influence in the shape of an interplay and a process where the student is given an opportunity to formulate and reformulate their subjective interests are what signifies a positive influence”] (Skolverket, 2008). In order to decide whether influence is positive or not it is, according to Forsberg, important to ask: Are the students given the opportunity to reflect over, formulate and reformulate their interests?

**Learner awareness and learner responsibility**

Learner awareness means having a meta-cognitive knowledge about learner strategies. In a learning process the student is always learning something, in some way and in some context. Learner awareness refers to how students should be made explicitly aware of their learning strategies, learning methods, the aims of teaching, goals et cetera, so that they can make deliberate choices when it comes to the learning process and become aware of themselves as learners. In order to achieve this, the teacher must shed light on the learning process and make the learner aware of how information is perceived and processed (Lundahl, 2009, p. 42). Learner awareness thus means promoting the learning process, and it is a central concept in *Läroplan 2000* where it is mentioned in six out of the seven steps that describes what language learners on different levels in the education system should master (p. 276).

Per Malmberg discusses language awareness in connection to learner awareness in the article “Språklig medvetenhet” (2001). According to Malmberg there are three different kinds of awareness promoted by the steering documents: language awareness, learning awareness and cultural awareness. Language awareness means being able to “reflect on language to get some general idea of what sort of phenomenon language is” (Hawkins quoted in Malmberg, 2001, p. 141) while learner awareness deals with the students’ individual knowledge of how they learn best. Cultural awareness means that every student is aware of different cultures and the differences between them. In the end the focus should be on the learners and what strategies the students use when learning a language (p. 142). For learner autonomy, learner awareness and self-directed learning to work, students have to realise that they themselves have the main responsibility for their learning process. In order to develop as learners they have to take an active part in this process (Lundahl, 2009, p. 308).
**DOCUMENTS**

**Steering documents**

The *Curriculum for Compulsory School, Lpo 94*, is a nationally set document that states the fundamental values, goals and guidelines for the entire Swedish school system. In it, it is said that “[t]he democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should embrace all pupils” and that the student should “take increasingly greater responsibility for their own work […] and be able to exercise real influence over their education” (*Lpo 94*).

*The Malmö City School Plan* is a document that specifies what parts of the governmental steering documents that should be prioritised in the schools of Malmö. The five prioritised areas – language development, security, safety and health, democracy and influence and intercultural work – are coloured by the opinions of the current political powers. Their aim is to make the schools reach the national goals (*The Malmö City School Plan*, 2004, p. 3f).

Democracy, one of the five prioritised areas, is a central feature in *the Malmö City School Plan*. School is described as an arena where every student participates and where democratic thinking is founded (p. 8). In order to enable creativity and development, participation in the form of real student influence is required (p. 9). The text even goes so far as to say that democracy is a decisive factor for enabling successful students, that motivation and willingness to work increases when the student is involved in the process and that all participants in school should engage in working with democracy and influence (p. 14).

Every school is obliged to put together a local work plan which should state how it intends to work in order to help every student reach the goals in the steering documents. In this work plan, the school has to interpret all the different goals in the national and local steering documents, and also take into consideration the organisation, ways of working and other local conditions of the individual school to decide how to work towards the goals.

In the local work plan for School A, student democracy and learner responsibility have a prominent place. One of the goals the school wants to achieve is that “[a]lla elever tar ett större ansvar och ökar sin medvetenhet om det egna lärandet och utvärderar kontinuerligt uppsatta mål tillsammans med pedagog” [“all students take a greater responsibility and
increase their awareness about their learning and continuously evaluate set goals together with the pedagogue”). Further, it is said that the school’s mission is to make sure that every student develops different competencies: knowledge and skills, personal competencies and the ability to understand the democratic process: “Verksamheten i skolan ska utformas så att dessa tre dimensioner samtidigt står i centrum för elevernas dagliga lärande” and “[g]enom att var och en har möjlighet att påverka undervisningen och utvärdera arbetet har eleverna inflytande” ["School activities is to be designed so that these three dimensions are in the centre of the students’ every day learning” and “by giving each and everyone an opportunity to affect the teaching and evaluate the work, the students are given influence”]. Using different working methods are pointed out as an important goal in order to teach the students different strategies in order to help them develop into good learners. Also, the student’s responsibility should be increased in a way that suits their age and maturity.

In the beginning of the local work plan for School B, a few fundamental goals are formulated. Among these are “att alla känner sig delaktiga och tar ansvar i verksamheten” and “att alla elever får lika möjligheter utifrån sina förutsättningar” ["that everyone feels involved in and takes responsibility for the work at school” and “that all students are given equal opportunities based on their prerequisites”]. It is stated that the school should work towards strengthening every student’s knowledge and skills, letting the students’ learning be based upon their own experiences and encouraging the use of different learning styles to equip the students for life long learning. Specific goals for achieving influence are also set up, and it is stated that the students should have a real influence on the learning, be educated in democratic work forms and that the school should develop the forms for student influence in the teaching and learning situation.

**Report on students’ attitudes toward their schools**

Malmö City carries out an annual survey about student attitudes in schools. In 2008, a report was published based on a survey that has targeted students born in 1992, 1994 and 1996, i.e. students in years 5, 7 and 9. The students were asked to assess the school based on the *Malmö City School Plan* and its four categories separately, on a scale from 1 to 5. Its main purpose was to give a picture of how the students look upon their schools in order to verify the political process that has developed the local school plan in Malmö City. After compiling the different categories and giving them a mean value, the results were:
The most interesting part for our degree project is that the students valued “democracy and influence” the highest. The report stated that “[e]levernas bedömningar visar att skolan i Malmö i stort uppfattas positiv men också att det finns områden och enskilda påståenden i attitydundersökningen som måste utvecklas för att skolan i Malmö i sin helhet skall uppfattas som en bra skola med hög kvalitet” ["the students’ give positive assessments to schools in Malmö but there are also areas and single statements in the attitude survey that has to be developed in order for the school system in Malmö to be understood as a high quality school”]. According to the report, the students were satisfied with how the work with “democracy and influence” is carried out (Pettersson, 2008, p. 4).

**Authorities in the field of learner-centred pedagogy**

Learner responsibility, learner awareness and student influence have been investigated by many educational researchers. Some of the most prominent ones in the Swedish context are Rigmor Eriksson, Inga Rebenius and Jörgen Tholin.

**Rigmor Eriksson**

Rigmor Eriksson was an ardent promoter of autonomous learning in Sweden during the 1990s. She has published many books and articles on the subject. In one of them, *Språk för livet, idébok i språkidaktik* (2001), she, together with Annsofi Jacobsson, writes about learner autonomy pedagogy and how this can be applied in the language classroom. Along with many practical ideas they include a chapter on why student democracy should be implemented into the classroom. One reason is that it is stated in the steering documents, but there are other reasons as well, according to the authors.

The authors claim that the students become more aware of their own learning when they take responsibility for a greater part of the learning and teaching situation. This, in turn, promotes the idea of life long learning. Since school can only provide the students with a limited
amount of knowledge it is desirable that the students gain insights to help them develop as language learners on their own, even after the school years are over (p. 8).

Apart from this, Eriksson and Jacobsson state three more reasons to why students should be given more influence over their education. The first is that student democracy makes the students more aware of democratic processes, thus making them become better citizens. The second reason is that a raised awareness makes students more motivated and, as a result, more efficient learners. Reason number three is of a more practical nature. Today, the authors claim, the difference between the more able students and the weaker ones is larger than ever, the gap between them increasing every year. This requires a more individualised way of working, which a classroom where there is student democracy may provide (p. 9).

Eriksson and Jacobsson point out that even if most teachers believe it is a good thing to include the students in the planning of the course, many have gone back to a teacher-oriented approach simply because they did not get any satisfactory results out of working with learner autonomy. There may be many reasons for this, according to the authors. The students that function well in the traditional classroom, that are used to getting good results when working in this way, may become anxious when they are faced with making their own decisions. Others may have a difficult time getting started and are unable to plan their time in any good way, while some see it as an opportunity to do as little as possible. Many of these problems, Eriksson and Jacobsson conclude, decrease as the students get familiar with the new routines and know what is expected of them (p. 9f).

Inga Rebenius

Another prominent person in the field of learner autonomy and student democracy is Inga Rebenius, a teacher of English at upper secondary level, who has developed ways of working in school that promotes autonomous learning among students. She gives lectures and courses and writes books on the subject. In her book Elevautonomi i språkundervisningen, teori och praktik – elevautonomi på gymnasienivå (1998) Rebenius gives a background on learner autonomy and self-directed learning as a method and gives examples regarding how this method can be applied in the classroom. She also discusses the new teacher and student roles that come with this approach.

Rebenius draws a parallel between the autonomous learner and the successful learner in that both are personally engaged in the learning process, have an active approach to the assignment at hand and are curious about the world around them. She claims that it should be
every teacher’s duty to try and inspire all students into adopting this attitude towards learning. She also points out that autonomy in the learning and teaching situation is not a question of either-or but rather it is a scale where each participant manages to reach a certain degree of autonomy (p. 10).

Rebenius emphasizes that it is not easy to introduce a new way of working. Students’ expectations, stereotypical ways of learning, difficulties connected to developing a better understanding of their own ways of learning, weak and/or unmotivated students are factors that can get in the way of implementing a more student oriented way of teaching (p. 143).

**Jörgen Tholin**

Jörgen Tholin first encountered learner autonomy when attending a teachers’ seminar where Rigmor Eriksson presented how to abandon the traditional levelling of students and allow teachers to group the students into more heterogenic groups (Tholin, 1992, p. 21f). In *Att lära sig lära – engelska. Om elevplanerad undervisning* (1992) his discussions are inspired by Chomsky and Krashen and the shift from a form-based curriculum to a more content-based one. However, Tholin also acknowledges that form is important when learning a language and that language should be learned in a context where the students feel a need to express themselves (p. 11).

The language learning process is often referred to as different steps on a ladder. However, Tholin argues, it is important to recognize that all students are not on the same step of this ladder. Therefore he stresses the importance of an individualised language learning process. In order to achieve this, he claims, it is impossible to work in a teacher-oriented way. Instead it is best to work with the learner in focus, letting the students set up their own goals in correspondence to the curriculum and syllabus and plan their work with the teacher as a guide or supervisor. He also stresses that this has to be done in a communicative way since planning is a part of the learning process (p. 12). He is also in favour of letting the students work in small groups, trying to formulate their understanding in their own words. The students’ learning will improve if they get the opportunity to reflect over their own learning and connect their new knowledge to what they already know (p. 13).

Tholin also acknowledges some of the difficulties that can be encountered when working in this student-oriented way. Not all teachers will have a positive attitude towards changing their way of teaching, and many may find this way of working fuzzy. Many are also of the opinion that the teacher knows best and therefore should be the one in charge of the planning, a view
that not seldom is shared by many of the students. Tholin’s response to this is that resent research in the field of language learning seems to suggest a way of working that is very similar to the ideas presented in his book (p. 127f). Like Eriksson and Rebenius, Tholin’s goal is to get the students to take a greater responsibility and become more aware of their own language learning as well as the practical planning of their work that is illustrated in the figure below:

![Diagram of learner awareness and planning, doing, presenting, evaluating]

(Tholin, 1992, p. 25)

**Teaching materials in learner autonomy**

As the European Council promoted a more communicative way of teaching, with the concepts of learner autonomy, learning to learn, individualised learning and the idea of learner awareness, many teachers and scholars became interested in developing these thoughts and bringing them into their own classrooms. In Sweden this was done in the 1990s by Tholin and Eriksson who contributed to the introduction of learner autonomy in English textbooks in Sweden through writing *A Piece of Cake*, a textbook package with the ambition to help learners to plan and carry out their own work, to assess it and to become more aware of their learning. Drawing on the same sources of inspiration, Mary and Richard Glover, Bo Hedberg and Per Malmberg produced another textbook for the compulsory school, *Wings*. These textbooks focus on trying to make learners more aware of their own learning, offering a more
individualised way of learning English by providing a wide range of different tasks for the students to choose amongst.

Through these textbooks, learner autonomy became institutionalised, thereby losing its radical stance. In defence of this development, it may be said that institutionalisation through textbooks was a step that made learner autonomy comprehensible for more students while facilitating the teachers’ work.
METHODOLOGY

We started our investigation by looking at the steering documents for the Swedish school system in order to find out what is stated about student democracy, student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness. We also looked at a survey made by Malmö City investigating teachers’ and students’ attitudes in schools. In order to investigate teachers’ and students’ perceptions and thoughts on student democracy and student influence we decided that the most sufficient method was interviewing.

Method

Interviewing as a method

In their book *Interviews – learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann explain why conversation is such an effective way of getting to know another person: “Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction. Human beings talk with each other; they interact, post questions, and answer questions. Through conversations we get to know other people, learn about their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and the world they live in” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii). A more controlled way of conversation is the qualitative research interview which “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view” (p. 1). This is also what Zoltan Dörnyei discusses in his book *Research methods in applied linguistics* (2007):

> It is exactly because interviewing is a known communication routine that the method works so well as a versatile research instrument – in fact, although there is a range of qualitative research techniques available for researchers, the interview is the most often used method in qualitative inquiries. […] The typical qualitative interview is a one-to-one ‘professional conversation’ (Kvale 1996: 5) that has a structure and a purpose ‘to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’. (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 134)

Since we were investigating our informants’ attitudes and experiences we found that this method was the best tool for us to use. According to Kvale and Brinkmann, there are seven stages of an interview investigation: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing,
analysing, verifying and reporting. They claim that these stages “may be useful for novice researchers” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 97).

We used semi-structured interviews, which means that we had pre-prepared questions (appendix 3), all open-ended, where we provided guidance and direction, but we were “also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). The interview questions were based on what information we needed in order to answer our research questions. This is in line with what Dörnyei discusses: the fact that respondents “enter the interview session with some ideas of what may constitute preferred and dispreferred responses” and that this has to be dealt with (p. 141). The interviewer should try to be neutral and keep a low profile since it is the respondents’ thoughts and attitudes that are of interest.

As Polkinghorne (in Dörnyei, 2007) argues, a single session is not enough since this will not “produce the full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings” (p. 134). We did not follow this advice entirely since we only interviewed our respondents once. Instead we provided both teachers with the questions in advance as preparation. Since Teacher B answered the questions beforehand and sent a copy to us before the interview, the interviews were carried out slightly differently. The interview with Teacher A was a traditional interview with us asking the questions and the teacher answering. With Teacher B we mostly clarified her written answers as well as discussing some teaching materials she uses for self-directed teaching.

**Focus group interviews**

Instead of conducting a pilot study before interviewing the teachers, we followed Dörnyei’s advice and conducted a focus group interview (p. 136). The advantages of focus group interviews are that the “participants [are] thinking together, inspiring and challenging each other, and reacting to the emerging issues and points” (p. 144). The interviewer, who functions as a ‘moderator’, has to make sure “that nobody dominates the floor and that even the shyer participants have a chance to express their views” as well as preventing group thinking by encouraging the participants to think critically (p. 145). In order to make the collected information reliable, at least four group interviews should be carried out. However, our focus group interview functioned as a “pilot interview” in order to collect information for the teacher interviews, which Dörnyei claims is possible: “[i]n applied linguistics research
they have been widely used generating ideas to inform the development of questionnaires and subsequent deep interviews” (p. 146).

All three interviews were recorded and transcribed according to relevance for this degree project (Richards in Dörnyei 2007, p. 140). The transcriptions are kept by the researchers.

**Sampling**

Since student democracy is something that should be applied at every school, we did not have any specific criteria for selecting informants for the focus group interview. We decided to interview a group of students in order to gain a background for the interviews with teachers. We chose a group of six students attending year nine at School A, three girls and three boys. We sent out an invitation (appendix 1) approximately one week before the interview. During the interview we asked them questions on student influence, student democracy, learner awareness and learner responsibility (appendix 2). Both teachers are women and we chose them because we were informed that their teaching represent different teaching models, not because of their gender. They also teach at different schools in adjacent municipalities, which could give our study a wider aspect.

The first teacher, Teacher A, is employed at the same school that the students attend. She has been working at School A for 7 years and as a teacher for 20 years. She sees herself as a traditional teacher. She tries to include the students in the planning and carrying out of lessons, however she has had rather discouraging experiences when trying the self-directed approach. School A is situated in the outskirts of the city centre. It has about 500 students attending year 6-9. The students mostly come from well situated areas and the percentage of an immigrant background is low.

The second teacher, Teacher B, works at School B, which is situated in a small town. It has about 450 students in the years 5-9. She has been working there for 35 years, her entire teaching career. She has a long experience of working with student influence and has been working with it since the early 90s. Currently, though, she does not use this approach to the same extent. The reasons for this, she says, is lack of time: her work load has increased and one of her classes demands a high degree of teacher-oriented education.
Ethics

In our investigation and our interviews we have applied the ethic rules of scientific research as stated by Vetenskapsrådet. All participants in the interviews were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously, that recorded materials would be deleted after the completion of the degree project and that assumed names would be used in the text.
RESULTS

Focus group interview with students

We based the focus group interview questions on our research questions, discussing the attitudes towards and experiences of working with student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness. Based on the results from this interview we compiled the questions for the teacher interviews. We are aware that we have interviewed too few persons to make any general claims based on the results. The student interview should instead serve the purpose of getting an insight into some students’ thoughts about student democracy.

Student influence and student democracy

Many students seemed to have little understanding of the concept of student influence. This became evident when we asked them about what student influence meant to them. The first reaction from the informants was that they were not sure of what student influence actually meant. When given a chance to talk about it amongst each other they associated the term with how to act in the classroom towards the teacher and peers “Jag tycker det handlar om hur man bäter sig i klassrummet mot läraren, även utanför, man tar initiativet och gör läxor” (Student Em), while some made the connection with being able to influence through the student council. ”Jag tänker mycket på hur elever på skolan får vara med och påverka saker som händer på skolan, som genom elevrådet och så” (Student H).

When asked about what kind of influence they think they have the students’ response was very negative. It was clear that they did not experience any real influence over what to work with, but after reasoning about it for a while they agreed on that they actually have a say on a few things. Sometimes they get to choose what homework to have and how to get examined. If the work load in other subjects is too extensive they can also influence the amount of homework they get in English. Sometimes they get to choose what to do next, for example what chapter to read in the textbook or choose between two novels. They also agreed that they are allowed to give opinions about the school work, but they feel that these are rarely taken into account. Another opportunity for the students to make their voices heard is when they evaluate courses. Then they can have a say on what has been done during the course and what they would like to work with in the future.
It is not self-evident that students actually want more influence. Therefore we asked them whether or not they were satisfied with the degree of influence they currently have or if they would like more or less influence. The students did not seem to value influence very high and expressed a doubt on whether they actually would be able to handle the responsibility it means to have more influence. They thought they might choose “the easy way” if they got to decide more on their own. None of the respondents seemed to realise the fact that more influence still means reaching the goals in the syllabus. One girl expressed that it is okey that the teacher has the responsibility for the planning of the lessons, since “vi har så mycket annat att tänka på att man inte hinner tänka på vad man vill göra på lektionerna, det är rätt skönt att läraren tar hand om det och vet vad man ska göra” [“we have so many other things to focus on that we don’t have the time to think about what we want to do during the lessons, it is quite nice that the teacher takes care of it and knows what we should do”] (Student Mi). There was also a general view that the teacher is better aware of what it is they need to know and what they need to practice.

One of the arguments for working with student influence and student democracy is that it makes the learners more motivated and interested in their school work. We asked the informants what they thought about such a statement. And even though two of the students expressed that “det är alltid lättare att lära sig något som man känner att man vill lära sig än något man blir tvingad till” [“it’s always easier to learn something you are interested in, than something you’re being forced to learn”] (Student H) and ”då kan man välja något som man tycker själv är kul” [”Then you can choose something you actually think is fun to learn”] (Student M) the main focus of the discussion was that they thought it would be impossible to implement this approach into the classroom. Their reasons for this were that not all like the same things, how it might be problems getting along with the teacher or within the group and that it would be chaos. Again, they expressed their disbeliefs on being able to get things done properly, that they might not do “de viktiga uppgifterna, som grammatik och sånt och bara göra de enkla, lätta uppgifterna” [“the important tasks, like grammar, and instead do the simpler tasks”] (Student Em). One idea was that the students should be allowed to decide on what area to work with once every term and that the teacher decides on the central parts of their learning.
Learner awareness and learner responsibility

One important part of teaching in a student-oriented classroom is making the student aware of his or her own learning patterns, how he or she learns best. The goal is to make the student attain learner awareness, a term explained in more detail above. When interviewing the students we wanted to explore their thoughts and experiences about this, and also see to what extent they actually are aware of their own learning.

In order to find out what views the students have on learner awareness we asked them to state how or in what way they thought they learn English best. They believed that watching movies was a good way to learn English. One of the explanations to this was that they liked the fact that they could listen to the actors and learn the pronunciation of words and phrases. Listening to music and reading the lyrics are also popular ways of learning English. When it comes to more traditional school activities, writing and re-writing their own texts in English and reading fiction was mentioned. Some of the boys mentioned computer games and the fact that the participants in these games speak English to each other.

Apart from achieving a degree of learner awareness the students also have to realise that they must take personal responsibility for their own learning. When raising this question with the group, bringing books and writing materials to the lessons, taking notes when the teacher speaks, being active during the lessons and not being late for class or disturbing others were the main focus of this discussion. They also find it easier to continue working and not loose focus of the task when the teacher has to leave the classroom. To ask the teacher for extra help when there is something one does not understand was also mentioned as a way of taking responsibility. This is rarely done, though, since it is a question of not wanting to seem “efter och seg” [“stupid and slow”] (Student H) or “att man vill fjäska och vara bättre än andra” [“being a suck up and acting like you are better than others”] (Student Em).

For us as future teachers it is important to try to inspire our students in taking responsibility for their own learning. Therefore we were interested in their experiences of if and how they felt that their own teachers worked with the issue. The question we asked was: “Hur upplever du att läraren gör så att du ska ta mer ansvar för ditt lärande?” [“In your opinion, what does the teacher do in order to make you take more responsibility for your learning?”]. The answers to this were very vague. The students replied that ”vissa [lärare] verkar bara vara där för att de ska … De bryr sig inte riktigt om eleverna fattar eller inte” [”some teachers only
One part of learner awareness is self assessment and we wanted to know if this was something our informants were being involved in. Also, a good knowledge of the goals for the subject is a prerequisite for being able to self assess. However, self assessment seemed to be an unknown area for the students. They receive a written assessment and evaluation on their accomplishments at the end of each term and the language used is, according to the students, rather difficult. However, they are given the opportunity to meet with their mentor and discuss it. When discussing the steering documents the students said that their teacher guided them through the syllabus for English in the beginning of the first term, but they claim that the language used in the document is too complicated and hard to understand. They would prefer to have it explained in a comprehensible way.

**Interview with teachers**

The questions for both teachers were based on the student interview. Here the goals were to explore the teachers’ attitudes towards and experiences of working with student influence, learner awareness, student democracy and learner responsibility.

**Student influence and student democracy**

Student influence, according to Teacher A, is that the students have a real influence over the planning of the lessons and that they are able to choose between alternatives set up for them. Sometimes her students get to choose how to present their work but most of the time the whole group has to present in the same way, it is not an individual choice. The students can also decide what day should be the main homework day.

Teacher B, like Teacher A, strives at giving the students real influence in planning their work, but she has a slightly different perspective on student influence. For her it means that she plans her lessons based on feedback and evaluations from the students. It is also crucial to her that her planning is closely related to the goals for English for year nine, and that the students are aware of what is expected of them. Her students are also able to choose between texts and different ways of working with them.

Teacher A’s experience with student influence is decisive for what teaching material she uses. In the end of the 90s *Wings* was being used at her previous school and the students had a
greater influence on what to practise on in depth. But this way of working was very time consuming for her, since the students only handed in their work every four weeks to her to get it corrected. However, the feedback she provided did not seem to be of any interest for the students; they only wanted to see what grade they got.

Teacher B first came into contact with learner autonomy in the early 90s and she became so engaged with it that she rearranged all of her teaching. At first she overdid it and the students were given too much freedom to decide, it all went out of control. Nowadays she gives the students a more controlled influence; she makes the main planning and the students are given a clear focus on what to work with in connection to the goals and they are also able to choose some of their work based on the criteria. Like Teacher A, Teacher B has experience of how this way of working generates a heavy workload for the teacher and that all the students are interested in is the grade.

Teacher A does not believe that the students’ attitudes towards student influence has changed a lot over the years. But she agrees with the concept of student influence being more visible today than it was twenty years ago when she was a newly examined teacher. Student influence was not discussed then, now it is constantly on the agenda. Teacher B, on the contrary, believes that the students’ attitudes have changed a lot. She describes it as a process for democratic development: "nu är eleverna bättre rustade, mera tränade att ta ansvar, ställer krav på eget inflytande. När jag började som lärare kunde lärare försöka till inflytande ses som svaghet och med misstro" ["today’s students are better trained in taking responsibility and demand an influence over their learning. When I was a newly examined teacher, a teacher’s attempt to student influence was looked upon as a weakness and with distrust"].
The discussion about student influence is constantly on the agenda amongst the colleagues and members of staff. Teacher A says that it is more often discussed now than it was when she started to teach twenty years ago, since it has become a natural and essential part in school. Teacher B’s answer is quite similar. At School B the staff listen more to the students’ needs now and they also discuss their work with them on a regular basis. Finally, both teachers point to how the question of student influence is essential in the attitude surveys conducted every year and that it needs to be discussed in the classroom.

**Learner responsibility**

When asking the question “Vilket ansvar hade du önskat att eleverna tog?” [“What kind of responsibility would you like the students to take?”] the surveys on student attitudes are discussed once again. Teacher A’s experience is that the students are questioning why they should take responsibility for planning the lessons when they believe the teacher knows better. “ Ibland känner jag att de inte är så intresserade av att ha inflytande över innehållet i undervisningen” [“Sometimes I feel that the students are not interested in having any influence over the lessons”]. She believes this is so because it is easier for the students not to take any responsibility for their own learning and that they lack an interest for it. She says that the students need to get better at taking responsibility for basic things such as bringing the right materials to class. She would also like them to take a greater responsibility when the teachers present the goals in the syllabus for them. At the present stage they do not seem too interested about them. Teacher A adds that the reason for this is perhaps that they do not understand the syllabus but also that the teachers can get better at presenting the goals for English in an easier way.

According to Teacher B, it is important to keep a dialogue with the students and discuss what to do next. In return, she thinks, it would be nice if the students presented ideas with more enthusiasm and creativity. However, Teacher B thinks that the students feel that their suggestions are not being taken into account, and this can be a reason to why they do not want to take any responsibility for the planning. By giving them influence the teacher also gets an opportunity to learn about the students’ interests, and plan the lessons based on that. She also adds that instead of letting the students take over the whole planning, it can be better to ask them the question “Do you want to decide, should we decide together or should I decide?”.

Our next question was how they went along trying to make the students take a greater responsibility. Teacher B stresses the point of encouraging them to take responsibility and
show that learning can be done in different ways. More often now than before Teacher A tries to make matrixes for assessment focusing on specific goals for the area they are about to work with. This is one way to make the students aware of what is necessary to learn at a particular stage and also to get them to take responsibility over their own learning. They seem to like this way of working, according to her, but the results on their work varies depending on how responsible they are and also on how accustomed they are with this way of working. She believes that working with matrixes can be a great help and make it easier for both the teacher and the students to organise.

According to Teacher A, the benefits of including the students in the planning of the lessons are that a higher degree of responsibility can be expected from the students and that they might become more interested and engaged in what they are learning. She adds that she has little experience of this way of working; she is mostly familiar with letting the students choose an area to work with and then planning the details herself, adjusting it where it is needed. She also thinks that it is very difficult to take the individual into account, even though it is essential, there is simply no time for individual planning, she says, because the groups are too big. Also, responsibility is closely related to influence; if the students take a greater responsibility over the simpler things like bringing their materials to class, the teacher says she is more eager to give them a greater influence over the rest of the education. Teacher B’s response to this question agrees with Teacher A’s experience on the benefits of including the students in the planning of the lessons.

Om man är ärlig och med uppriktigt intresse tar med eleverna i planeringen har man allt att vinna. Eleverna kan komma med många kloka förslag och tar uppgiften på stort allvar om de själva blir tagna på allvar. Sen är deras förslag inte så realistiska alltid och då får man ju diskutera det, inte bara avfärdas.

[If you are honest with the students and include them in the planning of the lessons with sincere interest, you have everything to win. The students may give many good suggestions and they take the task very seriously. Sometimes their suggestions aren’t so realistic but then you have to discuss this with them rather than just dismiss their ideas.] (Teacher B)

Teacher B concludes by saying "naturligtvis blir det mer intressant och roligt om eleverna får vara med och planera. De växer dessutom då" ["naturally it gets more interesting and more fun if the students are involved in the planning. It also gives them a chance to grow"].
Learner awareness

When it comes to learner awareness Teacher A tries to make the students aware of their own learning by sometimes letting them rewrite their texts in order to learn from their mistakes. In these cases she does not provide the correct answers in their texts; she only makes a mark where their mistakes are and let the students correct them on their own. This, she believes, is a way of making them aware of their learning since they are showed where they lack knowledge about the English language. It is also important to make sure that when the students are allowed a greater responsibility and choose what to work with, that they challenge themselves in their learning so that they do not become lazy and do not keep up with their classmates’ language progress. She also teaches the students the importance of reading the text aloud and working actively with the vocabulary at home as well as in school in order to extend their understanding and reaching a higher level of communication skills.

Teacher B presents different ways to learn English to her students and gives them different examples on how they can practise their English at home and before an exam. One example is that a CD is included in the textbook where the texts from the book are read aloud and the students are advised to listen to this in order to learn the pronunciation and listen to different dialects and so on. She discusses two types of knowledge, the ability to learn by heart which most students have, and the most important one, the ability to use the acquired knowledge in their own production of texts and this is the part she focuses her teaching on because this is the one the students are going to use after school.
Summary of the results

When analysing the results from the interviews we came to the conclusion that applying student influence in the classroom is not as easy as it might seem in theory. The concepts used in this study, influence, awareness and responsibility, seem to have different meanings to the parties involved. When discussing the concepts with the students we deliberately chose not to define the concepts to them before asking them and as a result few of the students seemed to be aware of the concepts and their meaning. This made us come to the conclusion that all the concepts explained in our degree project have to be defined to the students in order to even discuss this with them in a meaningful way. As we discovered, students believe that influence is equal to decision-making in the sense of deciding all the contents of the lesson, rather than having a real influence based on their level of ability. They came up with several concrete answers concerning respectful behaviour towards teachers and peers, bringing basic materials and not being late for class. When being asked if they wanted a greater influence on their learning the answers varied.

The teachers’ definition of these concepts differed from that of the students’. They answered according to what is said in the steering documents. This was something we could have predicted, since they are obliged to submit to what is stated in these documents when teaching. But, to what extent do they do this? In trying to answer this we wanted to explore how the two teachers practically implement student democracy in their teaching, and what their attitudes are to student democracy, student influence and learner awareness. They both work in a learner-centred way to some extent, but Teacher B has more experience with this way of working. Both teachers highlighted the fact that even though the students are given influence, the teacher is the one that has the final say on what is being brought up in the classroom.

The concepts of student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness are closely linked together and overlap. We have not tried to make any separate definitions of the terms, instead we have chosen them in order to discuss the important parts in connection to the steering documents. They are also central concepts in the learner autonomy movement and they ought to be used in an active discussion between teachers and students.
DISCUSSION

Discussion of the results

The aim of this degree project was to get an insight into students’ and teachers’ experiences of student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness and their attitudes toward it in comparison to what is stated in the steering documents. As we expressed in the introduction, our belief is that the teachers’ attitudes towards and thoughts about these issues differ from that of the students’. This is confirmed by our findings.

Differing views on student influence

It was clear that the students felt little or no influence over the everyday school work even though it is stated in the different steering documents that every student should have a real influence over their education. At the same time they expressed doubts on whether they would be interested in greater influence over the planning of the lessons and whether they would actually be able to handle such an influence. Instead of focusing on taking such an opportunity to make the lessons more interesting they highlighted all the reasons to why they think that this method would fail. When interviewing the teachers they were unsure to what extent the students should be faced with greater influence over their learning since they have the experience that students are comfortable with not having very much influence.

When being asked if they believe the attitudes towards students’ influence have changed over the years, the teachers were of opposing thoughts. Teacher A says that her students’ attitudes have not changed, even though it has varied over periods, but that it is more visible today. Teacher B means that the students’ attitudes have changed quite a lot. Nowadays the students seem to be more aware of their rights and questioning authorities in a way that would never have been done before. It is very interesting that when the students express that they lack influence, the teachers express that the students actually have an influence. We believe that it is very important to raise the discussion with the students about this and also explain to them what student influence means and what is expected from them in order to get them to take a greater responsibility over their learning and thereby also get a larger influence over the lessons. If students and teachers had the same understanding of these concepts, our results might have been different. It is stated in the steering documents that the students should have a greater influence over their education. It is also their interests that has to be taken into
account by the teachers, but in order to get greater influence we believe that they not only have to be better informed, they also have to be interested in taking increasing responsibility.

The problem in giving them an influence, as it looks by the results, is that the students do not seem to be completely aware of the difference between “fun” learning and being aware of how they learn best. Even though learning should be fun, it does not mean that every part of the teaching should be decided on by the student. Student influence is instead something that has to be taught by the teacher and introduced in small portions increasingly during the students’ entire education, in accordance to Trim’s discussion (Tholin, 1992) about learning being a life-long process so that the students do not see the language lessons as a time of relaxation but as a time for preparation. Both teachers point out the need of discussing student influence, not just with colleagues but with the students as well. They stress the importance of making the definitions clear between passive knowledge and the ability to develop an actual understanding in accordance to what Finney discusses (Finney, 2002). One example is how Teacher B strives towards making the students able to use their acquired knowledge in their production of texts.

We agree to what is said in the article based on Forsberg’s work (Skolverket, 2008), that it is difficult to decide what is best for someone else. One of the most important assignments for the teacher is creating an interest to learn within the learner and that teachers and students work together towards a common goal in order to reach the requirements set by the steering documents. Forsberg states that it is better to focus on the individual’s interests rather than letting the content steer what is to be learned. As it looks from the responses we got from the teachers and the students, the influence the students are given at this present stage is content based, but the teachers also tries to take into account the students’ interests when planning. Both teachers let the students evaluate their own work as well as the content and thereafter change their planning if needed. When given opportunities to influence the content, the learners more often feel that their ideas are not being taken into account. Teacher B responded to this thought by saying that the students need to present feasible ideas, ideas that can be incorporated in the classroom.

Anxious students or students that have a hard time getting started are some of the reasons Eriksson and Jacobsson (2001) bring up as possible explanations to why teachers choose not to work with student influence to the extent they should wish. But they also add that a greater influence would be one solution to the increasing gap between the more able students and the weaker learners and hopefully an individualised way of working would generate motivation.
and awareness within the students. According to Trim heterogeneous groups are helped by students being more responsible for their own learning (Tholin, 1992). He also argues that this will make them aware of their own learning as well.

**Teachers’ wishful thinking about learner responsibility**

Like student influence, the students associate learner responsibility with being on time, doing their homework and behaving well in the classroom. They say that they have no experience of teachers encouraging them into taking responsibility. This is a very important and interesting finding since both teachers claim the contrary. This discussion is constantly on the agenda together with student influence. In order to make the students take responsibility the students are constantly being asked to bring the right materials to class et cetera. Our belief is that the students feel that the teachers are nagging at them more than encouraging them into taking responsibility, which is unfortunate. As Teacher A says, responsibility is closely related to influence, and if the students take responsibility over basic things such as bringing the materials, she is more eager to give them greater influence over the rest of their education.

When it comes to taking responsibility for the planning of the lessons the students seem to question why they should be involved in something they think the teacher knows best. This is in concordance with the experience expressed by Teacher A, who also believes that the students find it easier to let someone else be responsible of the planning of the lessons, even though they express a wish that the students showed a little more enthusiasm over the materials presented in class. Teacher B believes that it is important to ask the students if they want to take some, little or great responsibility. But if they do not want to, what happens next? We do not have a solution to this issue, but believe that a discussion like the one Teacher B suggests, is a good way to start. Reluctance is not an excuse to avoid the issue of learner responsibility. It is essential that the students are well equipped for life after school and know how to take responsibility over their learning and this is something for the teacher to mediate and the students to learn.

Both teachers are interested in working with students in an autonomous way, if only they had more time. As it is now, time is limited because of the large groups and a constantly growing workload. This is also what Eriksson and Jacobsson discuss (2001); many teachers who have tried working with learner autonomy have gone back to a teacher-oriented approach because they did not get any satisfactory results. Eriksson’s basic principle for introducing learner autonomy is that the teachers should pick and choose between the bits and pieces they like
about it and introduce it in their classrooms one step at the time. Maybe the teachers who “failed” in their work with student influence did what Teacher B did in the beginning: throwing themselves out into too deep water along with their students, and sink. If they did it is not surprising that they disliked the approach. If these teachers who have gone back to a more traditional way of teaching had continued, like Teacher B, giving the students real influence in a more controlled way, more satisfactory results could have been achieved. Like Eriksson and Jacobsson Rebenius state (1998) it takes a while for the learners to get familiar with new ways of working and de-codify the concept and even longer for reluctant or anxious students. The teachers should not give up, even though it is easy to fall back to the well known, traditional way of teaching.

Tholin agrees with Eriksson and Jacobsson on this matter (1992) taking the discussion further. Many teachers might be hesitant to this way of working because it might seem fuzzy and believe that the teacher knows best and should be the one in charge. It is not right to hand over all responsibility to the learners, the teacher and the students are co-producers. They work together as a team, the teacher being the team leader and a support to other members of the group.

Tholin further argues that it is the learner who should be in focus, and that they should set up their own goals in correspondence to the curriculum in a communicative way. When interviewing the students, they said that the language in the steering documents is too difficult and abstract for them to understand and the teachers agreed with this. The teachers believe that when they discuss the documents, they have to do this in a simpler way and present it in small portions in connection to what is being taught at the moment. Teacher A believes that this lack of understanding of the steering documents can be one of the reasons to why the students do not take responsibility over their learning and do not show any interest in the steering documents. She discusses that matrixes based on the steering documents are a good example of how she tries to help making the learners understand the documents, at their level of understanding and in small portions. Teacher B also works in connection to the goals, by letting the students choose some of their work on their own based on the curriculum. We believe that this can be one of the main things that have to be included in the teaching in order to raise the students’ awareness of learner responsibility. They have to know what is expected of them, if not, it is difficult to promote an autonomous way of teaching.

According to the new system of evaluation the students are given the document “individuell utvecklingsplan, IUP” where teachers discuss how well the learner has reached the goals for
the subject and what has to be done in order to reach a higher grade. But the students believe that the IUPs are as difficult to understand as the steering documents and they prefer to talk to the teacher in person. Even more important for the student and his or her ability to develop as a learner and to take responsibility for it, is to be able to self-assess. The school tries to promote the fact that taking responsibility over their learning and evaluate how to improve oneself can result in a better prepared student and a better democratic citizen.

Learner Awareness – or not?

When interviewing the students they seemed to be aware of what learner awareness was. At first we got the impression that they had actually reflected over in what way they learn English best, but when analysing the results we saw that they mostly made general comments about it in line with reading books, watching films et cetera. Even though there are no correct answers to this it is interesting to note that only one student made the connection to a school situation describing how re-writing her own texts was important for her learning.

As we have discussed above, students that are given a greater influence and responsibility over their own learning, might choose the simple path and become lazy learners. According to Teacher A the students have to challenge themselves in their learning. She tries to make them reflect over their own mistakes by not providing the correct answers in her feedback. This is also in line with Dewey’s thoughts (Sundgren, 2005) on how to make students become “reflective practitioners”. The final stage in learner awareness, according to Tholin (1992), is evaluating what you have learned so far and what to do next. As Eriksson and Jacobsson (2001) claim, taking responsibility over your own learning will in time result in awareness of the learning processes. A raised awareness will in turn result in higher motivation and the students will become more efficient learners. As Rebenius (1998) says, an autonomous learner is a successful learner.

Tholin (1992) argues that rather than focusing on form, content should be preferred, as this lays a good foundation for learning English. He continues by saying that form should not be excluded, form is important when learning a language, as long as it is learned in a context. Both teachers seem to be in line with Tholin’s thoughts, and they stress that the students’ production with teachers’ feedback result in awareness not only of your own learning, but of the targeted language, here being English. It is clear that both teachers are well aware of what is stated in the different steering documents, they refer to them and use them as a base when planning and evaluating their lessons. As with learner responsibility Teacher A makes
matrixes for assessment focusing on specific goals for the area they are about to work with in order to get the students to reflect over their learning. This is one way of making the students aware of what is necessary to learn at a particular stage and also to get them to take responsibility over their own learning. Even though it might not work at an early stage it is important that the teachers continue and perhaps take a step back and reconsider how to approach the problem in a different way instead of just giving up.

**The trustworthiness of the results**

The results in this study can not be generalised since this is only a small qualitative study. But by studying the steering documents in connection to the school and how it is being implemented, we gained a lot of information that is of interest for us as future teachers. Also, it can be useful for practising teachers to get an insight in how the understanding of the concepts treated here differ between the students and the teachers, and how important it is to have an ongoing discussion about them all the time with all parties involved.

All three interviews were carried out in different ways and with slightly different questions. If we were to do the interviews again we would use the same questions for all interviews in order to make the comparison of the results easier and more valid. Also, we might consider interviewing the informants more than once, as well as interviewing more teachers and students. Perhaps it would be interesting to include a questionnaire that could be distributed to a larger amount of informants. It might also be interesting to interview the parents’ view on this matter. However, time is limited and we believe that the answers that our informants provided us with are still very valuable and have given us a good insight into thoughts and attitudes to student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness.

We would like to conclude by highlighting a problem connected to the goals in the steering documents: They are general, trying to incorporate many skills and at the same time promoting an individual learning environment. As Sundgren argues (2005), it is important to teach the students how to find the means to achieve autonomy in schools. Why do schools not reach the requirements of student influence set by the steering documents according to the surveys?
CONCLUSION

We are aware of the limited size of our study. However, we have done what we aimed for, gaining an understanding of teachers’ and students’ attitudes to, thought about and experiences of working with student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness.

One of the greatest issues that teachers and students are faced with is that they have differing understanding of the concepts discussed. It is essential for keeping an active discussion between the parties that both teachers and students are familiar with the concepts concerning student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness. This is, in our opinion, the most useful finding we have made during this project.

We wanted to find out the students’ attitudes towards student influence, learner responsibility and learner awareness. We came to the conclusion that the students were reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning and were not very willing to take an active part in their own learning. This affects their possibility to influence the teaching and learning and also affects the development of the sense of learner awareness.

It has been very enlightening to learn that it is not easy trying to decide how much influence students should have, since they often seem reluctant to take the responsibility we teachers want them to take. As Trim (Tholin, 1992) states, education is supposed to be based upon the students’ needs and conditions in order to motivate them to learn in an efficient way. When working with learner autonomy the goal for language teaching and learning is that the students should develop their language competence and self esteem so that they want and dare to use the target language in their life outside school as well.

Since many students seem reluctant in taking responsibility it has been interesting to get an insight into how experienced teachers try to engage the students in taking responsibility over their own learning. Both teachers use many different ways trying to encourage their students in taking greater responsibility. They prioritise the issue but have experienced few truly successful results, where the students have actually shown very much progress into adopting an autonomous way of working. This has given us a motivation to consider working towards a more learner-centred classroom where the teacher and the students work together towards a common goal.
It is important that the teachers do not hand over all the responsibility to the learners. But, sometimes we teachers have to force the students into taking increasing responsibility over their learning as they grow older, since having an active interest in your own learning is a part of the steering documents and is a great preparation for life after school.

Many teachers can relate to the conflict of interest where the students only want grades while the teacher wants them to reflect over their learning and the feedback provided. This should not prevent the teacher from striving towards working with a learner-centred pedagogy. It is not the end of the world if one lesson or way of working fails in one particular group. The important thing is that we do not give up striving towards equipping our students with the language skills necessary to achieve a life-long learning.
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Tankar om elevinflytande

Vi skriver vår uppsats för lärarexamen och du har blivit utvald att delta i en intervju där vi vill diskutera med dig kring dina tankar om *elevinflytande i klassrummet*.


**TID:** elevens val tisdagen den 31 mars (14.55). Vi möts i sal 14 och går till en sal där vi får prata i lugn och ro tillsammans.

Innan intervjun vill vi att du ska *fundera* på dessa saker, skriv gärna ner några tankar här nedan:

1. Hur du lär dig bäst, genom lyssna, läsa, se på film osv.
2. Hur mycket du får vara med och bestämma över undervisningen idag?
3. Vilka delar av undervisningen du får vara med och bestämma över idag?
4. Är du nöjd med dagens situation, eller vill du bestämma mer/mindre?
5. Hur skulle du vilja vara med och bestämma i planeringen av undervisningen?
6. Vad är dina tankar kring elevinflytande?
7. Övriga tankar och funderingar

Som tack för att du ställer upp bjuder vi på en liten kompensation i samband med intervjun 😊

Tack för din medverkan!
Johanna och Pernilla
Appendix 2

Intervjufrågor fokusgruppintervju - elever

Student influence and student democracy

Vad betyder elevinflytande för dig?

Vilka delar av undervisningen och hur mycket får du vara med och bestämma över idag?

Hur upplever du att läraren gör så att du ska ta mer ansvar för ditt lärande?

Är du nöjd med graden av inflytande du har idag? Vill du bestämma mer/mindre?

Learner awareness and learner responsibility

Hur lär du dig engelska bäst?

Blir lektionerna roligare/intressantare när du får vara med och bestämma?

Tar du mer ansvar när du får vara med och bestämma? Hur tar du ansvar för din egen inlärning?

Har ni fått ta del av kursplanen i engelska? I så fall, på vilket sätt?

Får du vara med och bedöma din utveckling och var du ligger på betygsskalan?
Appendix 3

Intervjufrågor Lärare, Elevinflytande i planeringen

Student influence

Vad innebär elevinflytande för dig (i klassrummet, planeringen av lektioner)?

Hur skulle du beskriva dina erfarenheter av inflytande och hur arbetar du med att inkludera eleverna i planeringen? (utgår ifrån elevernas tidigare förståelse, reflektion av tidigare undervisning samt resultat, undervisningssätt)

Vilka delar av undervisningen brukar eleverna få vara med och planera? På vilket sätt får eleverna komma med önskemål angående undervisningens innehåll och utformning? På vilket sätt bör man ta hänsyn till elevernas intressen och behov?

I vilken utsträckning finns det vinster med att eleverna är inkluderade i planeringen? Tror du att eleverna tycker att undervisningen blir mer intressant och roligare om de är inkluderade i planeringen? Vad är din erfarenhet?

Har elevernas attityder till elevinflytande idag jämfört med när du började arbeta som lärare ändrats något?

Läroplanerna har allt mer framhållit elevinflytande. Har detta märkts bland kollegerna och i det dagliga arbetet?

Learner responsibility and learner awareness

Flera av de elever vi intervjuade sa att de tyckte att det var bra att de ”slapp” elevinflytande och att det blir bättre när läraren planerar. Stämmer detta överens med din erfarenhet? Vilken respons har du fått från eleverna?

Vilket ansvar hade du önskat att eleverna tog? Hur vill du att eleverna ska vara med och bestämma? Hur gör du för att påverka eleverna att ta mer ansvar?

På vilket sätt arbetar du för att medvetandegöra eleverna när det gäller den egna inlärningen, studieteknik m.m. (learner awareness)?