

**Feeling involved? Participation experienced by children with disabilities at mainstream schools.**

Brigitte E. Gantschnig<sup>1</sup>, Karen la Cour<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Zuerich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), Winterthur, Switzerland, <sup>2</sup>University College Sealand, Odensee, Denmark

**Introduction.** Mainstream schools have been identified to educate children with disabilities, which is a movement towards their full participation in social life. Participation in childhood occupations is essential for children's growth and development, as well as for their well-being and health.

Occupational therapists are well-trained for enabling participation, by focussing on performance of daily activities within natural environments. In order to enhance participation of disabled children it is critical to understand the children's own experiences of participation.

**Objective.** The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth knowledge about children's with disabilities lived experiences of participation in mainstream schools.

**Method.** Qualitative interviews were conducted with five children with physical and cognitive disabilities, between the ages of eight and twelve. Data was analyzed according to the descriptive phenomenological method .

**Results.** The results showed that the children appreciated attending mainstream schools for coming into contact with others and doing things together with them. Being a part of school life was identified to include experiences of participation and non-participation. In addition the results showed that physical and social environment influences experiences of participation and awareness of differences is facilitated through interaction with peers.

**Conclusion.** Together the findings complement empirical insights to the understanding of experienced and performed involvement, combined with subjective dimensions of environmental features that influence participation.

**Contribution to the practice / evidence base of occupational therapy.** This study compliments existing knowledge about disabled children's experiences of participation and non-participation. It further, demonstrates how the physical environment and social milieu can support engaged participation.