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Article *in* European Conference on Games Based Learning · October 2024

DOI: 10.34190/ecgbl.18.1.2896

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Repositioning Vulnerable Youth Through Educational Esports Programmes

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Abstract: A growing number of young Danes experience a drop in well-being as well as there is an increase in diagnoses such as ADHD and autism. These challenges are often linked with school refusal and an increasing need for special education programmes. Since 2007, selected vulnerable youth (age 16-25) have been offered an alternative to regular youth education called Specially Planned Youth Education (Særligt Tilrettelagt Ungdomsuddannelse or STU). More than 30% of students attending STUs are diagnosed with autism or ADHD. The purpose of this paper is to explore the learning potentials of esports educational programmes with this specific target group. The study presents data from an ongoing research project entitled "Esports as learning space and gateway for vulnerable youth at STU", which is supported by the Velux Foundation and currently in its second year while looking to finalise in 2026. More specifically, we analyse data from ten interviews conducted with vulnerable youth at three STUs, who participate in educational esports activities with commercial multiplayer games, primarily *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike* or *Valorant*. The interviews concern the students' gaming interests, their experiences with attending the esports programmes, and their perceived learning outcomes. All interview data have been coded and analysed using thematic analysis. Patterns and recurring themes in the data have been sought after based on questions of how students perceive themselves, what activities they engage in during esports education, and what the potential learning outcomes of the education are. Drawing on Dialogical Self Theory, we analyse and discuss the students' different I-positions and identify possible transformations made possible through the STU activities, which aim to support students in obtaining an autonomous and meaningful adult life. Our preliminary findings show that students generally have more positive experiences at the STU's than at their previous education. This includes adopting different I-positions that are more committed to a community than what they experience in their leisure gaming.

Keywords: Special Education; Vulnerable Youth; Social Gaming; Esports; Communication; Dialogic Self Theory

1. Introduction

A growing number of young Danes experience a drop in well-being as well as there is an increase in diagnoses such as ADHD and autism (Dumstrei, 2023). These challenges are often linked with school refusal and an increasing call for special education programmes. At the same time, a recent survey shows that most Danish children and youth (ages 1-15) are active gamers with 46% of them playing daily or almost daily, with boys playing for longer periods than girls (Medierådet for Børn og Unge et al., 2023). The survey also shows that more than half of the children aged 9-15 play games in order to meet with their friends.

In this study, we will take a closer look at social gaming in the context of special education. We are interested in studying how vulnerable youth (aged 16-25) participate in esports programmes at Specially Planned Youth Education (Særligt Tilrettelagt Ungdomsuddannelse or STU), which is offered to vulnerable youth unable to attend regular forms of youth education. More than 30% of the STU students are diagnosed with disorders such as ADHD and autism (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019). Moreover, several of the STU students have experienced school refusal and suffer from low well-being and/or stress, isolation and anxiety. Our exploration is part of an on-going research project entitled "Esports as learning space and gateway for vulnerable youth" (2023-2026) funded by the Velux Foundation. In this study, we wish to focus more specifically on how the vulnerable youth experience their participation in the esports programmes, where they play competitive multiplayer games, primarily *Counter-Strike* and *League of Legends.* This brings us to our research question: How do vulnerable youth position themselves as participants in esports programmes at Specially Planned Youth Education?

2. Multiplayer Gaming as a Gateway to Well-being and 21st Century Skills

Extensive research has mapped how playing multiplayer online games may contribute to the development of 21st century skills, especially communication and collaboration, which are key to succeeding in online games (Zhong et al., 2022; Qian & Clark, 2016). Research has also shown how multiplayer gaming may be used in the classroom to include at-risk school children, who rarely participate in everyday teaching (Hanghøj et al., 2018).

Moreover, several studies analyse links between well-being and playing online games, showing that the value or harm of gaming on well-being cannot be determined solely from whether and how much people play, but rather depends on contingent factors related to the player, the game, and the gaming context (Hartanto et al., 2021). An important factor is young people's social capital, which both involve bonding (e.g. trust) as well as bridging interests. A quantitative study finds that young people with high social capital are able to increase their sense of well-being and self-esteem through frequent gaming; whereas young people with low social capital tend to experience a decrease in their sense of self-esteem as well as increase in depression symptoms in relation to frequent gameplay (Kim et al., 2022). All these studies demonstrate how gamers' development of social relations (online and offline, school, and non-school) are key to young people's well-being. At the same time, we need more knowledge on how social gaming in educational contexts is experienced from the perspective of vulnerable youth.

3. Esports Education Programmes at STU

Our study explores the participation of vulnerable youth in esports programmes at three different STUs in Denmark. There are several similarities across the three esports programmes. First, they are all coordinated and taught by teachers with solid gaming experience, who invite the students to play competitive online multiplayer games such as *Valorant*, *League of Legends, The Finals* and *Counter-Strike* over the course of a 3 year period in order to develop personal, subject-specific, and social skills, which is the overall aim of STU. Secondly, each esports programme works with individual learning goals for each youth. Examples of goals may involve being able to complete an internship, being able to show up for teaching on a regular basis, or being able to ask for help when feeling lonely. Thirdly, the STUs have a dedicated gaming room with gamer PCs and high-speed wifi, allowing smooth gaming experiences - cf. Figure 1. The rooms are organised so that students can play together in groups and correspond with the esport games, designed to be played in teams of 5. There are between 6-12 students assigned to each esports programme.

Figure 1: A gaming room at an STU.

There are also important differences between the three STUs. One concerns the number of lessons devoted to the esports programmes. Esport activities involve one day per week at STU 2 and 3, but three days per week at STU 1. Another difference concerns the integration of esports gaming activities with other subjects. STU 3 combines esports with physical exercise and media design, whereas STU 1 offers esport as a standalone activity. Moreover, there is substantial variation among the students in terms of their personal and social challenges.

4. Methodology

The following are our methodological considerations, focusing on data collection and coding strategies. Our data consists of ten semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) conducted with students enrolled in the three esports programmes. The selection of the ten students was based on our aim to represent a wide range of experiences and positions, and, to a lesser extent, on accessibility. Not all students felt comfortable or prepared to be interviewed at the time of our data collection. Consequently, the findings presented in this paper are influenced by the specific voices available to us.

During the process of obtaining informed consent from the students, we addressed the five issues identified by Gallagher et al. (2009): ensuring that participants had sufficient information to make an informed decision, verifying their understanding of the information, managing parental or guardian authority, assessing their capacity to consent, and ensuring that consent was given voluntarily, without coercion or undue influence. These issues were addressed in the initial twelve months of the project, which were dedicated to acquiring domain knowledge through fieldwork.

All interviews were audio-recorded. Given the relatively small dataset, we chose a strategy that emphasised preserving authenticity (Hammersley, 2010) and staying connected to the interviewees' lived experiences (Forsey, 2012). This involved listening to the recorded interviews in various ways while taking notes. Although individual listening sessions occurred, we were also inspired by the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013) and the methodology of story-sharing (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). Therefore, we conducted shared listening and debriefing sessions with all research group members present.

The table below (Figure 2) provides an overview of the ten interviews, including data on age, STU experience, and game preferences - both at home and at the STU.

Table 1: Overview of interview data.

Name	Age	Experience at STU	Games played at home	Games played at STU
Mike (STU 1)	17	1st year	GTA5, Farming simulator, Ready or Not	Counter-Strike
Noah (STU 1)	22	3rd year	Counter-Strike, FIFA, Fortnite	Counter-Strike
Teis (STU 1)	17	1st year	GTA5, Fortnite, Roblox	Counter-Strike
Magnus (STU 2)	20	3rd year	League of Legends	League of Legends
Morten (STU 2)	19	1st year	League of Legends, Ghost of Tsushima, Lethal Company	League of Legends
Kim (STU 2)	22	2nd year	League of Legends	League of Legends
Mark (STU 2)	22	3rd year	Persona, learning games, League of Legends	League of Legends
Simon (STU 3)	19	2nd year	League of Legends, Elden Ring, Marvel Snap	League of Legends
Alfred (STU 3)	19	1st year	World of Warcraft, Fortnite, Hearthstone, Overwatch	League of Legends, Roblox, Fortnite
Oscar (STU 3)	18	2nd year	Counter-Strike, League of Legends, Dead By Daylight	League of Legends, Counter-Strike

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to familiarise ourselves with the data, incorporating both inductive and deductive strategies for coding data and developing categories (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

5. Theoretical Perspectives

We use Dialogic Self Theory (DST) to conceptualise how the students position themselves as participants in the esports programmes, and to understand their construction of meaning when reflecting on their participation. The dialogic self is understood as a multiplicity of I-positions within a 'society of mind' meaning that it is both multi-voiced and dialogical (Hermans, 2013). The I-positions can both be internal and external. They combine and reflect how the self relates to the environment (Hermans, 2013). An internal I-position could be 'I as a mother', where external I-positions refer to an 'extended domain of the self', e.g. 'my children' (Hermans, 2013, p. 83). In DST the 'other' have two qualities, both the actual others independent from the self, but also as constructed and reconstructed through the imagination of the self. In this way 'my children' exist in tension between the voice of the actual others and how this voice is constructed within the self (Hermans, 2013). Beyond the I-positions there are also meta-positions of the self, which is a position distanced from one or several I-positions that observe these positions and consider them from a 'helicopter view' (Hermans, 2013). We draw on DST in order to understand how vulnerable youth media use is a form of expression that generates ongoing dialogue in the self, as Fecho (2013) illustrates. He argues that reading, writing, and artistic expression can be seen as a valuable media used by youth to "seek understanding of the chaos around them" (Fecho, 2013, p. 128) and that youth need different means to construct such meaning. In this sense we understand each student's participation in the esports programmes as an engagement in media where different I-positions are expressed in dialogue.

6. Analysis

The analysis presents how vulnerable youth positioned themselves as participants in the esports programmes as STU Students in contrast to prior school experience (section 6.1), as alignment between leisure and STU gaming (section 6.2), and as participants in communities (section 6.3).

6.1 Being a STU Student in Contrast to Prior School Experiences

The first theme concerns I-positions where students in one context primarily feel isolated and stressed while in another more at ease and sensing a high degree of autonomy. These experiences and narratives reflected how the students had shifted external I-positions from being school pupils to being STU students. Our coding showed how the internal I-positions among the students of being isolated, struggling mentally or not feeling cared for dominate their recollection of experiences of public school. One student recalls his school experience like this:

> *"It was awful. The school didn't care if we were there or not. The pupils were all mentally switched off, so you couldn't have a conversation with anyone. I felt very alone"* (Oscar).

Another student describes his pre-STU school experience in a similar vein:

> *"Public school is torture. School is the worst invention ever. During my last six years in school we constantly changed teachers. I really struggled"* (Morten).

In contrast to this, the students portray themselves as more at ease as students in the esports programmes:

> *"At the STU everything is more relaxed, you don't have to worry about grades, you are taught different stuff, social stuff, you learn to live on your own, whereas in school it is much more academic. At the STU it is much more about your mental state and how you feel. They make an effort so when the day is done you leave with a smile on your face"* (Mike).

For some the position they describe themselves with is more akin to friends than students and teachers.

> *"We have a great atmosphere here, where we get to have fun with each other, including the teachers. You could never do that at my former school. If you made a joke with a teacher, they would send you straight home! it is like hanging out with a bunch of friends and not teachers"* (Kim).

The internal I-position of feeling at ease or relaxed among teachers and peers at the STU is related to having a sense of freedom, to be able to choose.

> *"I love the freedom here. There is a lot of freedom. Freedom to say, I don't feel like doing this. For instance, if there is a game I don't want to play, I don't need to play it. They get that I don't want to. That makes me feel more comfortable… about the entire school actually"* (Kim).

Among the ten students, only one (Mike) expressed predominantly negative feelings about the esports programmes. Whereas his peers experienced fewer constraints and more agency, this student continued to struggle to find a position where he could pursue his interests. Here is what Mike said about the teaching and the teachers at the programme:

> *"They start to piss me off sometimes. I don't like playing Counter Strike. Everyone should have the right to choose what they want to play"* (Mike).

Mike explains that he did not himself choose to enter the esports programme, nor did his prior gaming interest align with the games they play at the programme. The latter being a subject we will discuss in the following theme.

Overall, the students describe how their prior school experiences are predominantly negative, whereas their participation in the esports activities at the STUs is generally positive. The students position themselves internally as more at ease at the esports programmes, they view the learning environment as less demanding, and they experience to various degrees being part of a group with positive social relations. Considering that these are young people, who throughout their educational life have struggled with school academically and/or socially, the overall impression from our analyses is that the students thrive as participants in the esports programmes.

6.2 Aligning Positions Between Leisure Gaming and Gaming at the STU

The second analytical theme concerns the students' adopted I-positions as *gamers* - both in relation to playing at home (leisure gaming) and playing at the STU (educational esports). All of the students played games frequently at home (cf. Figure 2), which often involved different types of games, ranging from multiplayer to more casual games. Some students described specialised game experiences, such as Oscar, who had played on a semi-professional *Counter-Strike* team, or Mike, who had a deep knowledge of enacting the role as fireman on a dedicated *FiveM* server, which is an online mod for *Grand Theft Auto*. This variation of game genres (First Person Shooter versus Online RPG) suggested that the students had different game preferences. Generally, the students all experienced positive outcomes of playing at home, e.g. in terms of relaxation or maintaining online friendships.

In comparison to playing at home, the students' alignment with the aims of the esports programmes varied. We identified four different I-positions, which reflect how the students aligned themselves differently toward the esports activities at their local STU. The first I-position concerns students, who did not align themselves with the gaming activities on their esports programmes. They mainly preferred to participate in the classroom as *individual gamers*, similar to playing alone at home. Mike is an example of a student taking this I-position as he clearly stated how he would prefer to "be left on his own" to play something relaxing and that he did not like playing *Counter-Strike* at the STU. Interestingly, Mike did play other First Person Shooters at home, which suggests that he was more misaligned with the STU context than with the game type. Another student adopting the individual gamer position was Alfred, who sometimes agreed to play *League of Legends* with the other students in the classroom, but often struggled with using toxic language and "tilting". Consequently, he was sometimes allowed to play his preferred games individually such as *Baldur's Gate III*. The students who adopted the individual gamer I-position were all new to the STUs and only partially identified with the overall aims and concept of the esports programmes.

The second I-position is the *social esports gamer*, which we saw among students, who mainly participated in the esports programmes for social reasons. These students explained how they primarily showed up to hang out and "have a good time" (Alfred) with their friends. In the words of Teis: "It doesn't matter what we play as long as we are having a good time [hygge]". The students identifying with this position would often play different games at home and at the STU, indicating a weak alignment between their personal gaming preferences and the games that their teachers had chosen for them to play at the STUs.

The third position, the *curious esports gamer*, was expressed by students, who were new to the games chosen by their teachers, but had developed an interest in the games. As an example, Oscar had several years of experience playing *Counter-Strike (CS)*, but had limited prior experience with playing *League of Legends (LoL)*, which was played at his STU. This meant that Oscar had to learn *LoL* from scratch, a massively complex game, in order to take part in the class. However, Oscar did not mind learning a new game, as he was interested in playing the game together with other team members at the STU, especially those with a competitive mindset like himself. In this way, some students aligned themselves with their teachers' choice of esports games at their STU,

even though they had not played these games before entering the STU. In some cases students had also begun playing the games at home after being introduced to them at the STU.

The fourth and final I-position we identified is the *serious esports gamer.* This I-position concerns students, who had strategic aims and considerable experience with playing the games in their esports programmes. These students were clearly aligned with the aims of their teachers as they continually tried to improve their game skills, strategies and team performances, often with a focus on team communication. An example is Simon, who had become so experienced with *League of Legends* that he had also tried to fill out the demanding role as team leader during game sessions.

As the breadth of I-positions show, there was substantial variation as to how the students experienced alignment between their identities as leisure gamers and as esports gamers at the STU. Some of the students were clearly aligned, other students willingly accepted the game preferences of their teachers, and others again expressed negative opinions of the games they had to play. This points to an important dilemma of choosing games for teaching esports to vulnerable youth with different gaming preferences.

6.3 Participation Across Committed and Non-committed Communities

The third analytical theme concerns the students' adopted I-positions as members of different communities. We identified three positions. The first was in relation to playing at home (leisure gaming), which we describe as a *non-committal* I-position. Secondly, we identified two forms of *committed positions*: one concerning being a part of the STU and the other being a team member.

The students' experiences with gaming communities from their leisure time involved friends from previous relations, people they had met online and regularly interacted with, or more or less random people they encountered online. One student (Noah) explained that he had gained several friends through discord communities in his leisure time, but that they only met online. Noah preferred to game online and explained that the good thing about gaming online is that you can always just leave and take a nap on the couch. In this way, Noah's I-position of being a leisure player was *non-committal* as it involved informality and low obligations towards the gaming community. Several of the students' I-positions related to leisure gaming are non-committed with low obligations with the option to "tap in and out of relations" when they prefer.

The I-positions that the students assumed as part of the esports programmes at the STU's were different. At the STU, they experience being part of a community, which involves presence in-game, in the class, and at other locations at the STU. This allows for different I-positions and possibilities for participation which all are variations of being *committed* to the community. Some students had experienced getting 'real friends' where they can talk about problems or dilemmas. Kim explains that he has gained "camaraderie" in the esports programme, which he has not experienced elsewhere, even though he had played *LoL* (the game played at STU 2) since he was 7 years old:

> "*Many expect that gamers have friends online when they sit and play online. But at the STU you also get physical friends, people you can physically hang out with. And … I don't know, go out in town, and have a pizza with, … Virtual or physical face-to-face is different. You get completely different camaraderie than you would get if you just sat and played and met them online.*" (Kim)

Kim's experiences of having friends physically and at the STU are different then online friends, among other things because there are different opportunities or potentials connected to physical friendships and activities. In this way, the students' participation in esports class permeates the boundaries of their leisure time, making it easier for them to socialise. Magnus explained that in the esports programme they get to know each other on the pitch (football analogy) but also personally. Mark experienced that he is better at communicating with people outside of the esports class where the game becomes a good topic to initiate talks with peers. Mark explained that he and Magnus do not have a lot in common besides *LoL*, but it is easier for them to communicate about *LoL* because it is a shared interest they are both passionate about. Further Mark experienced that talking about a specific game can lead to another conversation later on.

> "*It's really an icebreaker if you need to start a conversation with someone else. Like, have you seen the new patch notes and everything? And then move into a conversation from there*." (Mark)

It is not easy for Mark to initiate a conversation. But talking about the game as a topic, a new I-position emerges, where it is easier to initiate a conversation with his peers because of their common passion for the game. In this

way, the external position of *being a participant in the physical STU community* permeates the in-game and in class experiences and allows new I-positions for the students such as *I as an initiator of conversation*. For some students, the community they experienced at the STU led them to experience new friendships and positive relations, for others they became aware of other programmes at the STU and began to see opportunities in other subjects. We also identified an I-position as 'communicating team member', which highlights the difference between committed gameplay at the STU and non-committed gaming at home. When Mark played *LoL* at home, he did not trust or cooperate with players he met online and explained that it is *"almost like two different games when you play at home versus here,"*. In the esports programme he experienced being part of a team:

> *But when you're in Esports, where you actually have to do things with others, you are kind of forced into it…. is just where you sit in an enclosed/confined room and are forced to cooperate with others. You can't just go completely autistic and do your own thing. You have to communicate with others.* (Mark)

For Mark you have to do things with others in esports and you are actually forced into doing it. He also used his diagnosis of autism to explain that you cannot "just go completely autistic", in the sense that, here is a task that you cannot do alone but you must communicate with your teammates. Several students experienced that being a team member was closely tied to how they experienced collaboration and communication in the game. Moreover, Mark also described how he was not used to collaborating in the other classes at the STU, where they mainly work individually on their own assignments.

The esports programmes at the STU offer different I-positions as being part of a committed community than they encounter in their leisure gaming activities. To a degree that students say that the same game played at the STU compared to at home are almost two different games. The possible i-positions of being part of a committed community are both in relations to in-game and being team members, but also in relations to getting to know the other students before and after playing, and even broader at the STU.

7. Discussion

This study has aimed to provide more knowledge on how vulnerable youth perceive their participation in esports programmes. In this way, we have both tried to highlight the beneficial and inclusive aspects of esports activities, but also tried to shed light on how students' gaming interests imply many different I-positions. In other words: gaming is not just gaming, but always involves contextual and normative practices, which require negotiation among the social participants to make sense.

The analysis shows how the esports programmes offer unique social spaces for vulnerable youth, which allow them to adopt new I-positions - i.e. as students in the STU classroom, as esport gamers, as team members and as members of learning communities, which involve new forms of relations, commitment and communication. Overall, the students expressed positive experiences attending the esports programmes, which were in stark contrast to their negative experiences with prior forms of education. At the same time, the interviews also revealed that the students' participation involved tensions, which may create dilemmas for making the esports programmes succeed. A key finding here was the varying alignment between the students' game preferences at home and the esport games, which they had to play at the STU. Some students clearly experienced a strong or at least acceptable match between the two gaming contexts, whereas other students were less optimistic and even negative about the teachers' preferred games.

Another key finding is that the esports programmes at the STUs allows for the construction of I-positions that are committed to communities, which can help the students to communicate, form friendships, being part of a team/group, and talk with other people. The experience of participating in a committed community was rather unique for the STU-students as they seldom experience this in their leisure gaming activities or their prior schools. One aspect that requires further investigation is if the online participation in the esports programmes (offered at STU 1 to help students integrate slowly into the esports programme) offer the same or similar possibilities for adoption of it-positions as being physically present.

A limitation to our study is, as mentioned, a potential selection bias. Because of the vulnerable position of the youth attending the STU, the teachers suggested which students to be interviewed, which might have prioritised students with more positive experiences. Furthermore, some of the suggested students did not want to talk to us. In this way, there may be other I-positions present among the students, which we did not have access to. It is important to emphasise that several of the I-positions described in the analysis are somewhat overlapping.

The I-positions suggested here rely heavily on the researchers interpretation and could be conceptualised differently. Through our continued studies, we hope to refine and deepen the categories.

8. Conclusion

In this study we have used Dialogic self-theory to interpret how vulnerable youth position themselves as participants in esports programmes at three STU's in Denmark. We conclude that students have more positive experiences at the STU compared to prior school experiences and that participation in the esports programme allows for students to construct somewhat unique I-positions as members of committed communities being team members or students at the STU's. This potentially has a positive impact on students' construction of their self and identity. Further research is needed to identify and detail the different I-positions adopted by the students but also to understand how the esports programmes facilitate the construction of the students I-positions. For example, how alignment between students' I-positions as leisure gamers and the games played at the STU can impact the I-positions students develop.

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