

Inside but still on the Outside?

Teachers' experiences with the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in general education

Sven Nilsen

Abstract

The central issue of this article is teachers' experiences with the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in primary and lower secondary schools, both in terms of the teachers' own challenges and the situation of the pupils. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with general and special education teachers in four local schools in Norway. The results indicate a limited degree of cooperation and coordination between general and special education. This in turn means a lack of adequate adaptation and an academic standardisation of the general education, which reduces the potential to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. Teachers find that pupils with SEN have a greater tendency than other pupils to fall by the wayside and be left to their own devices when participating in general education. It particularly seems to affect pupils who are quiet and withdrawn. Teachers point out their challenging work situation with a large number of pupils to follow up, which can lead to them not having enough time for and not giving enough attention to those pupils who need additional support.

Introduction and Background

The aim of the article is to gain a better understanding of how the teachers perceive the opportunities for meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in the

general education, viewed in the context of the intentions of inclusive education. An interview study was conducted in a sample of primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. The main research question is: how do teachers perceive their own challenges and the situation of pupils with SEN in the general education?

The pupils with SEN that these teachers are responsible for have some hours of special education every week where they are separate from their class, but most of the time they are in the classroom and taking part in the general education without any extra help. In order to provide a comprehensive picture of the education situation, both general and special education teachers were interviewed.

Education Policy Context

The Norwegian school system is based on the intentions of inclusive and adapted education. While inclusion covers all pupils, there has been a special focus on pupils with SEN, who are regarded as vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion (Report no. 29 to the Storting 1994-95). These intentions have evolved gradually over a long period of time, moving from an education characterised by segregation in separate special schools, to a focus on the integration of pupils with SEN in common schools in the mid-1960s. In the last couple of decades, inclusion has been clearly formulated as a fundamental principle of education. These changes have taken place as part of the development of a unitary school system with a view to 'one school for all' (Nilsen 2010). This development is in line with international trends in inclusive education (Vislie 2003; OECD 2003, UNESCO 2009a), and is characterised by a continuing challenge to design inclusive practices that enable schools to teach each and every one of their pupils (Ferguson 2008).

An essential feature of inclusive education is that it serves as an interaction between addressing diversity and developing a communality for all pupils, something that can be a difficult balancing act (Norwich 2013). This means that schools must seek to address the entire diversity of pupils' backgrounds and aptitudes by providing an adapted education, while at the same time enabling all pupils to feel that they are part of a community (UNESCO 2009a). This understanding refers back to the Salamanca Statement, which became an important international driving force in the efforts aimed at inclusive education. Although the main focus of the statement was special education, it also emphasised that inclusion applies to all pupils and is a responsibility for the school's overall education. The understanding is, therefore, that special education must be developed as part of a reform of the entire school and education (UNESCO 1994). In the continuation of this reasoning, it is essential that attention is directed not only towards the pupils' abilities and aptitudes, but also to changing the various factors in the learning environment that can constitute possibilities for and barriers to participation and learning for all (UNESCO 2009b).

Many years after Salamanca, numerous countries still have a long way to go to realise inclusive education, and one of the main challenges is designing the general education in a way that enables children with SEN to participate (Kuippis and Hausstätter 2014). Various quarters have stressed the need for further research in order to gain a better understanding of the conditions for inclusion for pupils with SEN (Mitchell 2014). This particularly applies to research that examines different aspects of collaboration between general and special education teachers and how this impacts on the situation for pupils with SEN in the general education classroom (Van Garderen, Stormont and Goel 2012). This can relate to the effects for both academic and social outcomes (Cara 2013). Such research should inter alia elucidate teachers' perceptions and experiences (Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie 2007), and help to

throw light on teachers' classroom practices and how they can be improved in a way that fosters inclusion for pupils with SEN (Mulholland and O'Connor 2016). This study represents one step in the direction of contributing to the understanding of teachers' challenges and the situation for pupils with SEN when they take part in the general education.

Against this background, inclusive education must be viewed in close conjunction with adaptive education, which is another fundamental principle for education in Norwegian schools. This principle should, as far as possible, be implemented through the general education, whereby all pupils are given challenges and support corresponding to their abilities. This requires all aspects of the education – syllabus, working methods, organisation and learning materials – to be differentiated with the diverse abilities of pupils in mind. It is acknowledged, however, that there are some pupils who do not receive a satisfactory learning outcome from the general education, and who therefore need a more comprehensive adaptation. The Norwegian Education Act gives these pupils a legal right to special education. However, teachers must attempt to adapt the general education to a greater extent before referring the pupil for special education (Ministry of Education and Research 1998). While Norwegian education policy emphasises that special education must be designed in a way that contributes to inclusion (Report No. 18 to the Storting 2010-2011), research calls into question whether it can actually do this in practice (Nordahl 2018).

In Norway, special education is organised in such a way that the majority of pupils (ca. 60%) receive this education through groups or individual lessons outside the general education classes. However, the time spent on special education for most pupils is limited, and approximately half of the pupils have up to seven hours per week (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017-18). Pupils with SEN thus spend the greatest part of their

lessons in general school classes without extra provision. Success in inclusive education for pupils with SEN is therefore heavily dependent on the general education also endeavouring to meet their needs and the general and special education being well coordinated (Nilsen 2017a).

Consequently, collaborative planning between general and special education teachers seems to be a crucial factor in meeting the learning needs of diverse learners (Carter et al. 2009).

International research suggests that teacher collaboration seems to be beneficial both in terms of teachers being able to improve their teaching of pupils with SEN and of pupils' learning outcomes (Gruenert 2005; Mattatall and Power 2014). Research indicates that joint discussion and reflection among teachers promotes an understanding that inclusion is a shared responsibility of all teachers and that it requires collaboration. It fosters the exchange of experiences and ideas, and encourages mutual support and common follow-up practices among all teachers who teach a pupil with SEN (Lyons, Thompson and Timmoms 2016; Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2018).

Collaborative teaching, where general and special education teachers work together and combine their expertise to meet the needs of all pupils in the class, can therefore be a valuable model of teaching. This applies to both the planning and implementation of educational programmes, such as the IEP process (Cook and Friend 2010). A summary of international research shows that co-teaching was moderately successful for influencing pupils' outcomes (Mitchell 2014). Earlier meta-analyses of both quantitative research (Murawski and Swanson 2001) and qualitative research (Scruggs, Masteropieri and McDuffie 2007) suggests that co-teaching can be socially and academically beneficial to pupils with SEN. Compared with solo-taught special education, co-teaching seems to be more effective in relation to, for example, outcomes in reading/writing (Tremblay 2013) and mathematics (Walsh 2012),

which are particularly relevant to the pupils taught by the teachers we interviewed (see the ‘Method’ section). The analyses also indicate that co-teaching can be a rather complex model in terms of, for instance, the teachers’ roles and responsibilities (Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie 2007; Friend et al. 2010; Mitchell 2014). Within the scope of this article, it is of interest to track whether the teachers we interviewed have a tendency towards collaboration or solo-teaching in their interface with pupils with SEN. Even where co-planning and co-teaching are not practised, there is a need for coordination and cooperation between general and special education teachers, whereby general and special education, as a minimum, can be planned and adapted in relation to each other.

It can be assumed that the implementation of an inclusive education policy is largely dependent on teachers being positive about it. Research indicates that teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion are reported by their pupils to have classroom environments with greater levels of satisfaction and cohesiveness and lower levels of friction, competitiveness than other teachers (Monsen, Ewing and Kwoka 2014). International research reviews suggest that although teachers may have positive attitudes towards the general philosophy of inclusive education, they can be more uncertain and sceptical about the consequences it has for their own teaching practices, and particularly with regard to pupils with SEN in the mainstream school (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden 2000; Avramidis and Norwich 2002). This seems to be partly linked to the fact that the teachers do not feel knowledgeable about or competent in teaching pupils with SEN. Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion appear to be influenced by their previous experiences in inclusive classrooms (Leatherman and Niemeyer 2005). Studies indicate that teachers who have experience with inclusive education and training in special needs education have more positive attitudes towards inclusive education than other teachers (de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert 2011). Consequently, teachers consider professional development

to be crucial to being able to respond to the increasingly diverse needs of pupils in the classroom (Horne and Timmons 2009; Paju et al. 2015).

Different Dimensions of Inclusion

Many years after the Salamanca Statement, the understanding of what inclusion entails varies considerably in the global sphere (Kuippis and Hausstätter 2014). In a Norwegian context, when the principle of inclusion was formulated in the 1997 national curriculum, it was stated that ‘the school must be an inclusive community with room for everyone’ (Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs 1997, 63). Having ‘room for’ is not just about physical access to the same school. It emphasises that all pupils should also belong to a social and academic community, which facilitates learning and development based on their own aptitudes. Consequently, inclusion must be viewed in a broad perspective, and covers several dimensions (Nilsen 2017b). This is also in line with a widespread international understanding, for example as defined in UNESCO’s policy guidelines on inclusion and an inclusive education agenda (UNESCO 2009a, 2009b).

The organisational dimension of inclusion is about placement and use of organisational forms. In Norway, the Education Act (Ministry of Education and Research 1998) gives all children the right to attend the local school in their catchment area. The law further provides for pupils to be divided into classes or groups. Under the legislation, pupils can be divided into other groups as necessary in parts of the education, but adds that pupils shall not normally be organised according to level of ability, gender or ethnic affiliation. Pupils can therefore be organised into individual lessons or groups temporarily, but not on a permanent basis. This presents a key challenge for teachers when trying to design the general education in a way that enables all pupils to participate.

In this study, where the focus is aimed at how the teachers perceive their own challenges and the situation of pupils with SEN in the general education, the academic and the social dimensions of inclusion are key issues.

Perhaps the most demanding dimension of inclusion relates to the *academic aspect*.

According to the Norwegian education policy, this aspect involves a difficult balancing act between enabling pupils with SEN to participate in the general education curriculum as far as possible, while also differentiating the education by addressing the needs of the individual pupil (Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs 1997). In order to plan the general education, many schools are using work plans in different subjects, which specify what the school class should work with in a given period of time, while at the same time enabling differentiated learning content for the pupils. Also for the special education it has been a principle that the individual education plans (IEPs) should be based on both the class's learning content and ways of activities and on the pupil's abilities and aptitudes. It has been an ambition that 'the need for individual challenges must be balanced against the need for common experiences in an inclusive education' (Report No. 29 to the Storting 1994-95, 23).

In terms of the academic dimension, the definition of an international agenda for inclusion indicates that a shift is required from homogenous approaches, where all pupils are offered the same, to an education based on diversity, where the curriculum and educational provision are flexible and can be adapted according to the abilities and needs of all pupils (UNESCO 2009a). This creates a curriculum dilemma: whether and to what extent pupils with SEN should have the same learning content as other children or different and adapted content (Norwich 2013).

A pertinent aspect of this study **was** to examine the teachers' perceptions of how the general education is coordinated with the special education in terms of curriculum planning, with a particular focus on the relationship between work plans for the general education and IEPs for special education. This is linked to the observation that collaborative planning seems to be crucial to meeting the needs of diverse learners (Carter et al. 2009), and that collaboration between general and special education teachers appears to have a bearing on the academic achievement of pupils with SEN (Van Garderen et al. 2012; Mattatall and Power 2014).

Another aspect of the academic dimension that is also relevant to study is **whether** the teachers perceive a tension between academic standardisation and adaptation in curriculum planning, and the consequences of this. This largely depends on whether the work plans for the general education are the same for all pupils in the school class or if they are differentiated. This in turn can play a role in how the general education is adapted to pupils with SEN in terms of learning content and workload. By extension, a picture can be formed of how teachers perceive their opportunities to follow up pupils with SEN in their daily work in the general education classroom and of their experiences with how this affects the pupils' education situation.

The social dimension of inclusion refers to the extent to which the pupils – with their differing abilities and aptitudes – are not only placed together under the same roof, but whether they cooperate and have good relationships. This includes both pupil-pupil relations and pupil-teacher relations, and a key element is the pupil's participation and involvement in the work and activities of the class or group.

The Norwegian Education Act formally attempts to safeguard this dimension of inclusion by imposing a requirement on schools to foster a good psycho-social environment that promotes health, well-being and learning. The provision in the Education Act for pupils to be divided into classes or groups also has an important addition: ‘the organisation shall safeguard the pupils’ need for social belonging’. It is important that the teachers are aware of this and take it into account.

In terms of the social dimension, both Norwegian and international research indicate that social inclusion can be a major challenge for pupils with SEN, and some of them can experience social loneliness when taking part in regular classes, which can be of great concern for many teachers. Children with SEN seem to have a less favourable social position than others, and tend to be less popular, have fewer friendships and participate less often as members of a subgroup (Pijl, Frostad and Flem 2008; Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). In particular, such challenges seem to apply to children that the teachers consider to be shy and withdrawn (Lund 2008; Kalutskaya et al. 2015). An important aspect of this study is therefore how the teachers perceive their own challenges and the situation of the pupils in relation to facilitating the pupils’ social participation in the school class as a social community.

Method

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of eight teachers from a total of four schools in Norway. In each of the two participating municipalities, two teachers from a primary school and two from a lower secondary school were interviewed (Nilsen 2017a). The interviews are a follow-up of main tendencies in a previous survey study, where all teachers in the two municipalities participated (Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen and Skogen 2015).

A purposeful selection of informants is intended to ensure that the teachers have direct experience with and can give rich information about the research issue (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Patton 2014). Since the study is intended to illuminate the teachers' experiences with the education for pupils with SEN, both a general and a special education teacher are interviewed. This is because the pupils with SEN that these teachers are responsible for have a few special education lessons per week where they are separate from the rest of their class, while most of the time they are in the classroom participating in the general education without any extra help. In each of the four schools, the interviews were conducted with teachers from school classes with at least one pupil receiving special education. By interviewing both a general and a special education teacher in the same year at each school, an overarching picture can be obtained of the situation for the teachers and the pupils.

When selecting the special education teachers, the criterion **was** that they teach pupils with specific learning difficulties related to reading, writing and/or mathematics, which are among the most common problems in Norwegian schools. In addition to having special education, the pupils also had to participate in the subjects of Norwegian and mathematics in ordinary classes.

The selection of general education teachers included contact teachers. They are responsible for coordinating the work in the class and having contact with the pupils, parents and teachers in different subjects. They are assumed to be the teachers who have the most comprehensive knowledge of both each pupil and how the general education is planned and implemented.

In order to conduct the interviews, permission was obtained from the management in the relevant local authorities and schools. The request for the teachers to participate in the interview was procured by the school leader based on specific criteria and together with information about the interview. Participation in the interview was voluntary, and the teachers signed a declaration of consent to participate.

The interview guide was based on a combination of structure and openness. It consisted of questions based on selected themes, whilst also giving the informants a clear opportunity to reflect on and describe experiences and considerations they regarded as important.

A qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012). When coding and categorising the interview texts, some central themes were identified, which can be seen as condensed and coherent patterns in the material (Patton 2014). The themes that emerged through the analysis are, on the one hand, based on the interview guide, but also partly stem from the experiences the teachers brought up during the interviews. As such, the themes are formed through a combination of a deductive and inductive approach.

The analysis revealed no significant disparities in results between either the two municipalities or between the primary school and the lower secondary school. There was also a large degree of correlation between the experiences of general and special education teachers. The same main patterns emerged among the informants. The results are therefore presented as a whole.

In principle, the study has the limitation that it only provides a picture of how a sample of teachers from four schools in two municipalities perceive their own challenges and the education situation of pupils with SEN. Generalising the results therefore has clear limitations. The fact that the same main patterns emerged among the informants in these municipalities and schools can give grounds to assume that the same tendencies will be found among some other teachers and schools. This must be judged according to potential transferability based on recognisable descriptions, whereby the readers of the research results can see similarities between their own situation and the situation described, enabling them to identify whether the experiences described are parallel to their own (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Brinkmann and Kvale 2014).

Results

General Education – not coordinated with Special Education?

The first issue to emerge from the analysis of the teachers' experiences with the education situation of pupils with SEN relates to cooperation and coordination of the academic content. Since the pupils with SEN participate in both special education outside the classroom and general education in the classroom, teachers and pupils are both dependent on cooperation between general and special education teachers in order to establish good cohesion in the teaching and learning.

However, the interviews give the impression that the opposite is true: that there is very little academic cooperation and communality. Consequently, general and special education for the most part seem to be separated from each other. This applies to both curriculum planning and implementation.

In the case of special education, the main impression is that the special education teachers feel somewhat isolated in relation to devising individual education plans (IEPs) and in the implementation of the education. They call for more cooperation with the general education teachers.

In the case of general education, the opportunities for pupils with SEN to participate largely depend on the general education teachers' planning and implementation, which are for the most part based on one-week or two-week work plans. It transpires that these teachers are not particularly familiar with IEPs and nor do they feel responsible for following up the plan during their lessons. One of them typically makes the following observation:

‘To be honest, I don’t keep the IEP for the pupil to hand. It’s actually filed away and is retrieved when the annual report is to be written. At least that’s my impression.’

At the same time, the special education teachers report that they either do not participate or only participate to a limited extent in the planning of the general education, and that they do not know enough about what the pupils with SEN do in this part of the education.

According to one teacher, ‘there is little correlation between what the teachers do in special education and what the teachers do in the classroom’. This leads to a lack of unification in the education and the absence of cohesion in learning processes, which in turn has a negative impact on the pupils. It is therefore typical when one of the class teachers acknowledges that ‘for the weaker pupils, the correlation between what they do in ordinary classes and what they otherwise have in special education is very poor’.

Teachers express the need for better opportunities, not least more time, and joint cooperation, particularly for planning and exchanging ideas and experiences. They feel that this would have positive effects for both teachers and pupils: ‘we will be able to make the education provision for the pupil more coherent and ensure that being in the classroom and being in separate groups are not perceived as two different worlds’.

Academic Standardisation more than Adaptation?

Another important issue, which also affects the academic dimension of inclusion, relates to the extent to which the general education is characterised by curriculum adaptation or standardisation in the context of pupils with SEN, and what impact this has on the implementation of the education.

This depends largely on whether the work plans for general education are differentiated. It transpires, however, that the work plan is often the same for the whole class, and that work plans are seldom adapted. Consequently, the main tendency is that all pupils work towards the same goals and carry out the same tasks, but the pupils themselves have the freedom and responsibility to choose when, how quickly and where (at school or at home) they will do the tasks. On further reflection, teachers say that this cannot be a good situation for pupils with SEN. The teachers realise that the lack of curriculum adaptation may impact the general education in such a way that is not adapted well enough for pupils with SEN. For example, one of the teachers expresses that ‘much of what we do as a whole class entails words and terms that are difficult for them, so they just sit there wondering what the teacher is talking about’.

The general education teachers also point out that the lack of cooperation between them when devising work plans has a negative impact on the pupils' workload. When the teachers plan for their subjects and their teaching individually, it means that too little consideration is given to the balance between the number of tasks and the workload for the pupils. The teachers realise that there is a clear need for improvement in this area, and say 'we need to be better at looking at the workload we subject the pupils to'. In particular, it is pointed out that the overall workload affects pupils with SEN and that 'it becomes too much for them to deal with'. This is also confirmed by the special education teachers, as when they try to have a sidelong glance at the work plans, they find that the plans can be both unrealistic and devoid of the adaptation that the pupils need. As one of them observed, 'as a special education teacher you need to reduce the amount of work, help them to disregard what is not quite so important for them and focus on what is important'.

The lack of adaptation of the work plans and the absence of limitations in the workload are further burgeoned by how pupils with SEN experience the pace of work when they participate in the general education. The teachers can subsequently find that 'the pace is too fast for those in the class', which in turn means that the pupils 'simply think it is good to get out (to special education)'. Thus, the rate of progression required in general education will be too fast, and the pupils will not be able to keep up with all of the themes covered in the different subjects. There is too much of a gap between the progression that characterises the class's teaching and the progression that characterises these pupils' learning development.

The lack of cooperation and coordination between the teachers can also give rise to some extreme outcomes. When general education teachers are not familiar with the pupils' IEPs, the pupils can risk being faced with content in the general education that is completely

contrary to their IEP. One of the special education teachers reports that the pupils ‘often get tasks to work on from areas outside the IEP’. This can also apply to homework, with some pupils getting homework on areas they are exempt from through the IEP.

‘Falling by the Wayside’ – ‘left to their own Devices’

The teachers expressed a concern that pupils with SEN are ‘falling by the wayside’ or ‘left to their own devices’ when they participate in the general education, which most of them do for the majority of the lessons.

This represents a major dilemma for the teachers. On the one hand, they realise that pupils with SEN generally need more support than other pupils, but on the other hand they find that they ‘are unable to provide the pupils with the help they need’.

Class teachers point out that pupils with SEN are in an ‘exposed’ and ‘vulnerable’ situation when they participate in the general education without additional support. They find that the pupils can ‘very easily fall by the wayside’; they ‘become passive’ and ‘do not get anything done’. One of the class teachers explains it as follows:

‘In the lessons I have them alone in the classroom, they become much more passive, and are often left to their own devices (...) You notice that things are very different when they are with the special education teachers.’

Pupils sometimes end up falling by the wayside because they fail to keep up with the teaching in the class and the pace of work, and sometimes they are left to their own devices because the teachers feel they are unable to follow them up.

When it comes to falling by the wayside, teachers sometimes find that pupils with SEN ‘take a very long time to understand what to do and to get started’. When the teachers explain something to the class, they see that these pupils ‘often do not understand’. This means that ‘they often don’t get anything done’, and ‘often just sit there, but without getting any benefit from it’.

In relation to the teachers’ fear of the pupils with SEN being left to their own devices, they refer to their challenging work situation and that they have many demanding pupils to follow up. This can also apply to pupils who do not receive special education and who have behavioural problems for example. One of the teachers makes the following observation:

‘There is a lot to stay on top of in the teaching; the focus is on a very complex pupil group that needs a lot of attention from me.’

Teachers report that they have tried in different ways to make allowances for pupils with SEN in the classroom. For instance, one of them has ‘tried to seat them somewhere in the classroom where I can monitor them more easily’, but has come to the realisation that ‘when there are so many pupils in the class, it’s actually very difficult’, and that applies for both the pupils and the teachers. While the teachers can consider it less than ideal that pupils have to work outside the classroom, and say they ‘wish they could follow them up even more’, they have come to the conclusion that many of the pupils with SEN ‘benefit from getting out of the class’.

Teachers find this a major challenge, particularly when they are alone in the classroom and have several pupils who need extra follow-up. They find that this impacts on the pupils, and express that they ‘have a guilty conscience because of it’.

Being overlooked – becoming invisible

In the interviews, the teachers had a strong focus on their challenges with the pupils with SEN who they perceive and characterise as *quiet and withdrawn*. The teachers recognise that there is a high risk of them being overlooked and of the pupils themselves trying to make themselves invisible.

Some of the pupils who can easily be overlooked are referred to by the teachers as ‘normally quiet’ and ‘not making much fuss’. They can see that the pupil ‘is not noisy and not restless’. The teachers consider this to be a positive attribute in principle. However, on closer inspection, it may prove to be a problem, as one of the teachers describes it, because ‘it may seem as if the pupil is working, but when I go around to check their work that’s not the case’.

One of the teachers elaborates as follows:

‘I try to go over to the pupil, and explain that “now we will do this”, but I see that he’s sitting with his own books and is in his own world. He may just as well be somewhere else.’

As well as finding this group of pupils easy to overlook, the teachers also acknowledge that this can easily result in them ‘not getting the follow-up they need’. This is linked to the competition for time and attention from many pupils. The teachers find it difficult to help everyone, making it easier for the pupils who are keener and who put their hands up to get the most help. In such cases, the teachers recognise that the quiet pupils can ‘play second or third fiddle’ and therefore not get the help they need. Paradoxically, the pupils who need the most support from teachers can end up being given the lowest priority and the least support.

Coupled with the risk of being overlooked, it can seem as if some of these pupils try to make themselves invisible in the class. They do not take the initiative to say anything, do not put their hand up to answer questions, and remain as quiet and passive as possible. One of the teachers makes the following observation about one pupil:

‘The pupil has assumed a role in the class as a quiet non-participant. Even in groups where he is expected to participate, he doesn’t.’

This causes the teachers to wonder: why do some pupils act like this? There may indeed be several explanations, but as one of the special education teachers says about one of the pupils: ‘Obviously there’s a reason he’s trying to be invisible in the classroom.’ The teacher warns against placing all the emphasis on individual characteristics, and would rather approach the answer by pointing to the pupil’s perspective of his situation in the class:

‘How does the pupil feel about being in an ordinary class without extra help, and not understanding very much? I can only imagine how that is. It’s not a nice situation at all, and that’s why I think they develop survival strategies.’

Teachers realise that an education marked by a lack of adaptation in relation to the individual pupil’s abilities and aptitudes, where pupils are given tasks and challenges that they often cannot manage or master, can lead to withdrawal and an attempt to become invisible as a coping or survival strategy. It is pointed out that such a strategy can entail the pupil preferring to appear passive and lazy rather than as someone who is academically poor. One of the special education teachers describes their experience with some of the pupils as follows: ‘I think it’s far preferable to appear to be lazy than stupid. I think it’s a clever strategy’.

Some of the special education teachers also point out how there is a risk that class teachers misunderstand this way of behaving. As one of them says, ‘they cannot see through this behaviour and the possibility that it might be a strategy of self-preservation in the class’. They point out that in some cases teachers seem to have the attitude that because the student does not disturb the class or complain, ‘they say he is managing fine.’

The teachers find that some of the pupils with SEN, and particularly the quiet and withdrawn ones, also have a difficult social role in the class. The interplay between the academic and social aspects is referred to here. One of the teachers describes their experiences of this as follows:

‘I think it’s often the case that when they enter the class they are like a square peg in a round hole. The teaching is not adapted to them, but they stay in class because they do not get any more special education.’

As a result, the teachers realise that some pupils with SEN may end up as both an academic and social outsider, and may feel alienated and excluded in the class they were supposed to be included in. This in turn can lead to them socialising and working separately from the other pupils as opposed to with them. It may also make them feel they are treated with less social regard than their fellow pupils, and that they have a lower status. Some teachers report that this poses a risk of some pupils with SEN being stigmatised within the school class.

Accordingly, one of the teachers states that ‘I think some of them feel stigmatised, I’m sure of it’. Standardisation and lack of adaptation of the general education can thus be a contributory factor in making some pupils with SEN feel that their difficulties in following the work of the rest of the class are their own fault and can make them stand out as a deviant pupil.

Discussion

As previously indicated, many researchers worldwide have pointed to the need for further research on how and to what extent the general education works for pupils with SEN, viewed in the context of the intentions of inclusive education. The article aims to contribute to this understanding, with a particular focus on teachers' perceptions of both their own challenges and the education situation of the pupils.

As discussed in the 'Method' section, the low numbers of informants implies that care needs to be exercised in generalising the findings.

Viewed in the context of the academic dimension of inclusion, teachers find the lack of cooperation and coordination in relation to both curriculum planning and the implementation of the education a challenge. This is leading to a concern among teachers that the lack of cohesion is creating an academic disconnect for both the teaching and learning process. For pupils with SEN, there is a risk that general and special education will be perceived as segregated more than coordinated (Nilsen 2017a).

For many years, the Norwegian national curriculum has described teaching as teamwork, where teachers are supposed to 'function as a community of colleagues who share responsibility for the pupils' development' (Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs 1997, 23-24). In contrast, the interviews with the teachers suggest that general and special education teachers take responsibility for their own part of the education, and that they do this more on an individual basis than as a team. Co-teaching and other forms of collaborative approaches seem to be seldom occurrences.

This is also contradictory to research indicating that collaborative curriculum planning between general and special education teachers benefits the instruction and provision for pupils with SEN, and that teachers' cooperation and collective responsibility for all pupils is positive for pupil achievement (Carter et al. 2009; Gruenert 2005; Mattatall and Power 2014). The lack of cooperation can also lead to teachers having fewer opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences through joint discussion and reflection, which in turn results in less mutual support and common follow-up practices vis-à-vis diverse learners (Lyons, Thompson and Timmons 2016; Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2018).

The results of this study illustrate that the main tendency is that that the work plans are often the same for the whole class, and that work plans are seldom adapted. Practising a common work plan can lead to all pupils in the school class being offered the same learning experiences, with the consequence that pupils with SEN have insufficient opportunities to have learning experiences in accordance with their abilities and needs (Nilsen 2017a). It is clear that the teachers experience a curriculum dilemma: to find the right balance between curriculum commonality and differentiation (Norwich 2013). The teachers are worried that the same work plan for all may lead to an academic standardisation of the general education, which weakens the possibilities to meet the needs of diverse learners in general, and pupils with SEN in particular. However, this is also dependent on the curriculum potential and subsequent room for adapting teaching that the schools are afforded in the national curriculum (Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2011).

Viewed in the context of the social dimension of inclusion, we know from earlier research that children with SEN can be vulnerable to both the academic and social outcomes when they

participate in the general education (Cara 2013). Both Norwegian and international research indicate that some of them can experience social loneliness when taking part in regular classes, which can be of great concern for many teachers (Pijl, Frostad and Flem 2008; Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). This study indicates that teachers find that pupils with SEN tend to fall by the wayside more than others and can be left to their own devices when they participate in general education. The teachers make reference to their challenging work situation with many pupils to follow up, and this particularly affects the pupils who need extra support. The overall impression from the study is that the lack of adequate adaptations of the general education makes it difficult for pupils with SEN to function and be accepted as full, participating members of the classroom community.

Research shows that the academic and social challenges in particular seem to apply to children that the teachers consider to be shy and withdrawn (Lund 2008; Kalutskaya et al. 2015). In this study, the teachers reflect on how it can be easy to overlook these pupils, but they also find that the pupils themselves can try to make themselves invisible. Overall, the study shows that the teachers recognise that children who are shy and withdrawn struggle, both academically and socially, and that the teachers can find it a challenge to adequately meet the needs of these pupils.

Although the intention for many years has been for the common school to develop in such a way that the general education is adapted for all pupils' aptitudes and abilities, and for all pupils to belong to a social and academic community, this study shows that some schools have a long way to go before succeeding with this practice. Even though pupils with SEN attend the same physical location as other pupils, the teachers find that in the general

education they nevertheless seem to be more on the side-lines than together with the others, both academically and socially.

Based on the teachers' experiences, the pupils with SEN **are** viewed as academically disconnected because they fail to follow the common academic progression of the class. Too little attention seems to be taken to the fact that in an inclusive school class one needs to adapt the education to the individual pupil's own progression. The pupils with SEN are at a different stage in an education that is characterised more by sameness than differentiation. This may entail withdrawing not only academically but socially as well, and this may be a survival strategy chosen by some pupils when faced with an education that is characterised by excessive workloads, too high a pace and a lack of both adaptation and adequate support. This is a serious challenge to the ambition of 'one school for all'.

The fact that teachers themselves suggest that it is better for pupils to leave general education in order to receive an education that is better adapted to their needs is testament to the problems within general education in dealing with the diversity in the abilities and aptitudes of pupils.

The results of this study suggest that the general education, as it is practised here, seems to lack a basic prerequisite that is emphasised both in a national (Ministry of Education and Research 1998; Nilsen 2017b) and international context (UNESCO 2009a) for realising an inclusive education: the ability to address diversity and develop communality for all pupils. On the one hand, it may reduce the opportunities all for pupils receiving a satisfactory learning outcome from the general education, thereby contributing to the need for more

special education. On the other hand, it can also limit the outcome potential of pupils who already receive special education.

A major challenge for the general education seems to be the lack of collaboration and apportionment of responsibility among the teachers. The education seems to lack the potential to create synergy between teachers who combine different kinds of expertise and share responsibility in order to benefit all pupils in the class. In order to achieve such a synergy, learning how to work as a team member can be an important skill for breaking the habit of working alone as a teacher. By doing so, it may become clearer to teachers that they share the responsibility for both the problem and the solution (Carter et al 2009; Mitchell 2014, Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2018).

The school staff's perceptions of their ability to meet the needs of pupils with SEN in their daily teaching situations seem dependent on teacher pedagogical and practical knowledge as well as collaborative skills (Paju et al 2015). One significant barrier to supporting pupils with SEN in the general education classroom is that many general education teachers do not feel well enough prepared to do so. Developing better collaboration between general and special education teachers can be an important way of overcoming this barrier (van Garderen, Stormont and Goel 2012).

A more collective engagement through whole-school and classroom-based approaches can therefore be a determining factor in achieving better inclusive practices (Mulholland and O'Connor 2016). In order to establish a better general and special education partnership, for example in the form of co-teaching, this should be developed as part of a larger school reform, characterised by a supportive and collaborative school culture (Friend et al. 2010; Waldron

and McLeskey 2010). School-system strategies for continuous improvement seem to be needed (Walsh 2012).

Consequently, the challenges of ensuring the inclusion of pupils with SEN cannot be addressed as individual difficulties alone, but primarily as school difficulties. The lack of cooperation and coordination between teachers contradicts the understanding that inclusion is the responsibility of all of the school's staff, and that ever since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) it has been emphasised that special education must be developed as part of a reform of the whole school.

References

Avramidis, E., P. Bayliss and R. Burden. 2000. "A Survey into Mainstream Teachers' Attitudes Towards the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in the Ordinary School in one Local Education Authority." *Educational Psychology* 20 (2): 191-211.

Avramidis, E., and B. Norwich. 2002. "Teachers' Attitudes Towards Integration/Inclusion: A Review of the Literature." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 17 (2): 129-147.

Bjørnsrud, H., and S. Nilsen. 2011. "The Development of Intentions for Adapted Teaching and Inclusive Education Seen in Light of Curriculum Potential. A Content Analysis of Norwegian National Curricula Post 1980." *The Curriculum Journal* 22 (4): 549-566.
doi:10.1080/09585176.2011.627216. [Google Scholar]

Bjørnsrud, H., and S. Nilsen. 2018. "Joint Reflection on Action – a Prerequisite for Inclusive Education? A Qualitative Study in One Local Primary/Lower Secondary School in Norway." *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. doi:10.1080/13603116.2018.1427153. [Google Scholar]

Braun, V. and V. Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77-101.

Brinkmann, S. and S. Kvale. 2014. *Interviews. Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Buli-Holmberg, J., S. Nilsen, and K. Skogen. 2015. "Kultur for tilpasset opplæring. Skolelederrollen, lærerrollen og planleggingsarbeid. [Culture for Adapted Education. The School Leader Role, the Teacher Role and Curriculum Planning]." Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk. [Google Scholar]

Cara, M. 2013. "Academic and Social Outcomes of Children with SEN in the General Education Classroom." *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 3 (7): 90-99.

Carter, N., M.A. Prater, A. Jackson and M. Marchant. 2009. "Educators' Perceptions of Collaborative Planning Processes for Students with Disabilities." *Preventing School Failure* 54 (1): 60-70.

Cook, L. and M. Friend. 2010. "The State of Art of Collaboration on Behalf of Students with Disabilities." *Journal of Educational Psychological Consultation* 20 (1): 1-8.

de Boer, A., S.J. Pijl and A. Minnaert. 2011. "Regular Primary Schoolteachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education: A Review of the Literature." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15 (3): 331-353.

Ferguson, D.L. 2008. "International trends in inclusive education: the continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 23 (2): 109-120.

Friend, M., L. Cook, D. Hurley-Chamberlain and C. Shamberger. 2010. "Co-Teaching: An Illustration of the Complexity of Collaboration in Special Education." *Journal of Educational Psychological Consultation* 20 (1): 9-27.

Gruenert, S. 2005. "Correlations of Collaborative School Cultures with Student Achievement." *NASSP Bulletin* 89 (645): 43-55.

Guest, G.S., K.M. MacQueen, and E.E. Namey. 2012. *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Horne, P.E. and V. Timmons. 2009. "Making it Work: Teachers' Perspectives on Inclusion." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 13 (3): 273-286.

Kalutskaya, I.N., K.A. Archbell, K.M. Rudasill and R.J. Coplan. 2015. "Shy Children in the Classroom: From Research to Educational Practice." *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 1 (2): 149-157.

Kiuppis, F. and R. Hausstätter, eds. 2014. *Inclusive Education Twenty Years After Salamanca*. New York: Peter Lang.

Leatherman, J.M. and J.A. Niemeyer. 2005. "Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusion: Factors influencing Classroom Practice." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 26 (1): 23-36.

Lincoln, Y.S., and E.G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lund, I. 2008. "'I just sit there': shyness as an emotional and behavioral problem in school." *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 8 (2): 78-87.

Lyons, W.E., A. Thompson and V. Timmons. 2016. "'We are inclusive. We are a team. Let's just do it': commitment, collective efficacy, and agency in four inclusive schools." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20 (8): 889-907.

Mattatall, C. and K. Power. 2014. "Teacher Collaboration and Achievement of Students with LDs: A Review of the Research." *LD@school*. Ontario: Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.

Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. 1997. *The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway*. Oslo.

Ministry of Education and Research. 1998. *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education (Education Act)*. Oslo.

Mitchell, D. 2014. *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.

Monsen, J.J., D. Ewing and M. Kwoka. 2014. "Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion, perceived Adequacy of Support and Classroom Learning Environment." *Learning Environments Research* 17 (1): 113-126.

Mulholland, M., and U. O'Connor. 2016. "Collaborative classroom practise for inclusion: perspectives of classroom teachers and learning support/resource teachers." *International Journal of inclusive Education* 20 (10): 1070-1083.

Murawski, W.W. and H.L. Swanson. 2001. "A Meta-Analysis of Co-Teaching Research. Where Are the Data?" *Remedial and Special Education* 22 (5): 258-267.

Nilsen, S. 2010. "Moving Towards an Educational Policy for Inclusion? Main Reform Stages in the Development of the Norwegian Unitary School System." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14 (5): 479–497. doi:10.1080/13603110802632217. [Google Scholar]

Nilsen, S. 2017a. “Special Education and General Education – Coordinated or Separated? A Study of Curriculum Planning for Pupils with Special Educational Needs.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21 (2): 205–217. doi:10.1080/13603116.2016.1193564.

[Google Scholar]

Nilsen, S. 2017b. “Å møte mangfold og utvikle fellesskap [Addressing Diversity and Developing Community].” In *Inkludering og mangfold – sett i spesialpedagogisk perspektiv. [Inclusion and Diversity – From a Special Education Perspective]*, edited by S. Nilsen, 15–37. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. [Google Scholar]

Nordahl, T. et al. 2018. *Inkluderende fellesskap for barn og unge. [Inclusive Community for Children and Young People]* Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Norwich, B. 2013. *Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.

OECD. 2003. Diversity, Inclusion and Equity: Insights from Special Needs Provision. In OECD: *Education Policy Analysis*. Paris: OECD, 9-37.

Paju, B., L. Rätty, R. Pirttimaa and E. Kontu. 2015. “The School Staff’s Perception of their Ability to teach Special Educational Needs Pupils in Inclusive Settings in Finland.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20 (8): 801-815.

Patton, M. Q. 2014. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pijl, S.J., P. Frostad and A. Flem. 2008. The Social Position of Pupils with Special Needs in Regular Schools. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 52 (4), 387-405.

Report No. 29 to the Storting 1994-95. *Om prinsipper og retningslinjer for 10-årig skole – ny læreplan*. [Principles and guidelines for the 10-year compulsory schooling – a new curriculum]

Report No. 18 to the Storting 2010-2011. *Læring og fellesskap. Tidlig innsats og gode læringsmiljøer for barn, unge og voksne med særlig behov*. [Learning and communality. Early intervention and good learning environments for children, adolescents and adults with special needs]

Ritchie, J. and J. Lewis. 2003. *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.

Ruijs, N.M. and T.D. Peetsma. 2009. “Effects of Inclusion on Students with and without Special Educational Needs Reviewed.” *Educational Research Review* 4 (2): 67-79.

Scruggs, T.E., M.A. Mastropieri and K.A. McDuffie. 2007. “Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research.” *Exceptional Children* 73 (4): 392-416.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. 2017-18. *Grunnskolen informasjonssystem* [System for registering information on primary and lower secondary schools]

Tremblay, P. 2013. "Comparative outcomes of two instructional models for students with learning disabilities: inclusion with co-teaching and solo-taught special education." *Journal of Research in Special Educational needs* 13 (4): 251-258.

UNESCO. 1994. *The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO. 2009a. *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO. 2009b. *Defining an Inclusive Education Agenda: Reflections around the 48th session of the International Conference on Education*. Genève: UNESCO, International Bureau of Education.

Van Garderen, D., M. Stormont and N. Goel. 2012. "Collaboration between General and Special Educators and Student Outcomes: A Need for More Research." *Psychology in Schools* 49 (5): 483-497.

Vislie, L. 2003. "From integration to inclusion: focusing global trends and changes in the western European societies." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18 (1): 17-35.

Waldron, N. and J. McLeskey. 2010. "Establishing a Collaborative School Culture Through Comprehensive School Reform." *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 20 (1): 58-74.

Walsh, J.M. 2012. "Co-Teaching as a School System Strategy for Continuous Improvement."

Preventing School Failure 56 (1): 29-36.