Aiming for (what) capabilities? An inquiry into school policy for pupils with intellectual disabilities

Gøril Moljord

Department of Special Needs Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Corresponding author is Gøril Moljord

goril.moljord@isp.uio.no
Abstract

While entitled to education, the curriculum for pupils with intellectual disabilities (ID) remains unresolved. In a time of curriculum renewal, this study inquires into Norwegian school policy in the period 2014–2018 to evaluate this learner group’s course of study. Attentiveness to special education and curricular approach are discussed through content analysis of school policy documents. The findings show sparse special needs education guidelines and academic mainstreaming. Content related to developing pupils’ communication, practical and social skills may be marginalised, risking depriving pupils with ID of skills for adaptive functioning and flourishing. Applying capability as an evaluative lens, this study makes a normative contribution to discuss what to aim for in a school for all and suggests directions for course changes.

Keywords: intellectual disability, curriculum, policy, aim, purpose, capabilities, inclusion
Introduction

Much is at stake when choosing the educational pathways for pupils with intellectual disabilities (ID). Coexisting with strengths and relative to contextual support, ID is characterised by limitations in intellectual and adaptive functioning (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2010). In Norway, it was not until legislative changes in 1975 that pupils with severe ID were viewed as educable and entitled to education (Nilsen, 2010). The Norwegian school system has progressed toward a common compulsory school system encompassing pupils across ability divides, with inclusion and equality as basic intentions (Nilsen, 2010; Ministry of Education and Research [MoER], 2017). However, meeting pupil diversity puts high demands on curriculum decision-makers to balance individual and common interests.

Mastery of one’s own life, participation in communities and working life are promising educational ideals in the preamble of the Norwegian Education Act (1998, Section 1-1). Yet, for people with ID marginalisation and limited self-determination, limited social, recreational and work participation are commonly reported (National Competence Centre on Developmental Disabilities [NAKU], 2019; Wendelborg et al., 2017; Skarstad, 2018; Garrels, 2019). According to the Norwegian Education Act (1998, Section 1-3), adapted education is a basic principle for all education, and if required, pupils have a legal right to special needs education and an individual education plan (IEP) (Sections 5-1 and 5-5). However, the lack of specification and extensive scope for professional discretion regarding these regulations has been questioned, raising concerns that under the guise of a common school, pupils’ special needs could be made invisible (Nilsen, 2014; Karseth & Møller, 2018). Report 2016:17 to the Ministry of Children and Equality (2016) states that education for pupils with
ID is not equal to that of the majority of pupils in terms of goals, assessment systems, frameworks and learning outcomes (p. 67). Concerns have been raised over the exemptions from the national curriculum framework for these pupils (Norwegian for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities [NFU], 2018). IEPs for this group are less targeted and of limited quality and coherence with framework and contents of the ordinary education curriculum (Bachman et al., 2016, p. 20; Report 2016:17, p. 62, p. 67). This prompts the need to question IEPs in their current form as a functional steering document for special needs education.

Current Norwegian school policy pays much attention to outcomes and performance, but little is known about whether this enhances opportunities for all pupils, its implications for equality and its broader aims for education (Mausethagen, 2013). An understanding of learning outcomes focusing on benchmarking and competition may limit discussions about what constitutes valuable learning (Prøitz, 2015). In a study of educational provision for pupils with Down syndrome, Engevik et al. (2018 p. 47) note that inclusion practices may not coincide with political ideals, suggesting that features of inclusion should be investigated more closely. School policy rests on epistemic and normative assumptions about the individual and society – about what is worthwhile to strive for. Critical curriculum inquiries are crucial to realise inclusive and equal education, especially for marginalised groups. Analysing the Norwegian government-appointed Ludvigsen Committee reports to the MoER (2014 and 2015) about the ‘School of the Future’, Haug (2016) notes that the reports do not specifically refer to pupils needing special support. Further, a focus on the relationship between content and pupil diversity appears to be invisible (p. 68). While
earlier policy studies concern inclusion and special education in Norway (e.g. Haug, 2016; Nilsen, 2010; Nilsen, 2014), little is known about the conditions for pupils with ID. It is pertinent to explore schools’ capabilities to meet their educational needs. Inclusion is an endorsed but ambiguous ideal in which the course of study (i.e. the curriculum) remains an unresolved issue. The content offered to this group in Norway and internationally (Ware, 2014) is underresearched, aligning with a global trend in educational policy discourse on learning in which content seems to disappear (Deng, 2018). Discussing schooling for pupils with ID, a new paradigm of intervention research is called for (Gustavsson et al., 2017), as are philosophical understandings connecting to the broader purposes of education (Gallagher, 2017, p. 488; Nilholm, 2017, p. 490).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the course of study for pupils with ID in Norwegian school policy from 2014–2018, attending to those with severe educational needs. The timespan comprises the starting point for the subject renewal of the current national curriculum – Knowledge Promotion 2006 (KP06) (to be implemented in 2020) – and policy initiatives to change the special education system. A broad range of sources are used to illuminate the issue. Motivated by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and inspired by the capabilities approach, this study examines current policy for aspects that promote and may impede basic capability development for pupils with ID. Although only sketched out in this paper, the concept of capability is chosen because it serves as a wide approach to educational aims. A basic assumption is that if education purports to be inclusive, enhancing capabilities - expanding educational opportunities for all should form its core. The capability approach, as Amartya Sen pioneered and Martha Nussbaum and others developed, is a broad normative framework to evaluate a just society, emphasising equality and education as a crucial
foundational capacity for human well-being and as a potential enabling capacity for people to live lives they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2005; Reindal, 2010; Reindal, 2016; Terzi, 2014; Wood & Deprez, 2012, p. 471). There are no official guidelines for teaching pupils with ID in specific; thus, the reports, white papers, curriculum regulations and guide for special needs education this study analyses are assumed to comprise the school policy discourse that frames education for this learner group. Two research questions guided the study:

1. How is special needs education for pupils with ID addressed in the documents?
2. What characterises the curricular approach for this learner group?

First, the study situates the analysis within concepts of educational needs, approaches and purposes. It then describes the selection of documents and methods. The attention paid to pupils with ID and special education as found in the documents forms the background for a discussion about the curricular approach characterising current policy. The term ‘curricular approach’ is used broadly to explore salient ideas, views of learning, teaching, curriculum objectives, content, methods and assessments specifically in relation to pupils with ID. Following a study of trends in curriculum research for pupils with ID (Moljord, 2017), this study pays specific attention to the conditions for a functional life skills approach. Capability is used as an analytic concept to explore two important dimensions – the capability to obtain high-quality special education, and the capabilities made possible through education. Regarding both, this study suggests renewed pathways for policy.

**Pupils with intellectual disabilities and (special) educational needs**
Pupils with ID constitute a diverse group; however, they have certain learning characteristics in common (e.g. cognitive difficulties with short-term memory, abstract abstract thinking and generalisation of learning), and communication, language development development and academic achievement may be difficult for this group (AAIDD, 2010, p. 196). Other characteristics include limitations in social, practical and conceptual skills, i.e. adaptive behaviour typical for their age and culture to meet the daily demands for functioning (p. 43, p. 46). As a result, transferring knowledge and skills from one context to another may be difficult. In general, curriculum decisions must correspond with what children need to learn. As Vehmas (2010, p. 91) points out, it is not possible to define something as a ‘special need’ without establishing the criteria for what learning outcomes are desirable, important or necessary. Deciding what needs are ‘special’, or deciding which curricular steps to take, involves a normative evaluation of what is valuable to strive for. Thus, needs become inseparable from aims. In line with the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2007), Granlund (2013) emphasises everyday participation as essential when planning for support for persons with disabilities, a concept the Norwegian Education Act reflects (1998, Section 1-1). Given proper support, life functioning will generally improve among persons with ID (AAIDD, 2010, p. 1). Thus, a content area (skills, knowledge) in pupils’ IEPs may be functional in that it is of value to the pupil and applicable across current and future preferred life contexts. Relatedness, autonomy and competence are viewed as basic components of human well-being and the common basic psychological needs of all people (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and are thus not very special. However, the educational pathway to fulfil those needs/aims for pupils with ID may be special. In contrast to typically developing peers, many pupils with ID need systematic
instruction to learn life skills, such as communication, practical and social skills and self-determination skills (Bouck, 2017, p. 375; Cronin, 1996, p. 53). To promote learning, specialised curricula and instructional strategies are often operative – like modified content presentation with verbal or visual cues, demonstration, modelling or positive behaviour support (Wehmeyer & Lee, 2007, p. 577, p. 580). Thus, ID is relative to environmental barriers and supports, of which curriculum is one. Inspired by Sen (1992, p. 81), it is imperative that pupils with ID are given the opportunity to choose and live the lives they have reason to value. Listening to the voices of this population expressing their educational needs and desired outcomes is essential.

Curricular approaches – A brief outline

Internationally, the phases in the short history of special education for pupils with ID have been referred to as 1) the developmental approach in the 1970s, based on typical development; 2) the functional approach in the 1980s, focusing on independence and age-appropriate functional skills; 3) social integration from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, stressing social skills and community membership; overlapping with 4) self-advocacy and self-determination, honouring personal preferences and choice (Thompson et al., 2017; Shurr & Bouck, 2013; Browder et al., 2003). ‘Inclusion’, ‘general curriculum access’ and ‘academic philosophy’ are used to refer to the phase lasting from the 1990s to the present. In 1994, the globally endorsed Salamanca Declaration initiated inclusion as a political objective for education, clearly reflecting the concept of overcoming the divide between special and ordinary education (Reindal, 2016, p. 1). In the US during the 1980s and 1990s, calls for
increased integration in general education classrooms strengthened (Thompson et al., 2017, p. 40). A change of curricular focus toward access to a general education curriculum for all emerged – including pupils receiving special needs education – that was defined by similar academic standards and age-related expectations (Thompson et al., 2017, p. 40; Ware, 2014).

Although not directly applicable to the Norwegian context, some characteristics of these phases may be discerned. In Norway, the national curriculum ‘Mønsterplanen’ (the M74) in 1974 marked one common curriculum for all (Nilsen, 2014, p. 50). A curriculum supplement, ‘Undervisning av elever med utviklingshemming’ [Teaching students with intellectual disabilities], was published by Grunnskolerådet [the Primary and Secondary School Council] in 1977 ‘to provide teachers with the guidance necessary to teach students with ID, focusing on content different to that of the M74 due to the severe learning difficulties of this group of learners’ (p. 7). Some features of a developmental approach can be recognised in this supplement. Since the M74, no similar official curriculum resources have accompanied the subsequent national curricula. Nilsen (2014) reports a decline in attention to special education in Norwegian curriculum history since the M74, with the KP06 reported to have the lowest amount of coverage. The emphasis on adapted education is suggested as an explanation for this. The subject curricula in the KP06 comprises competence objectives covering mostly academic subjects. Regarding a functional approach, content areas related to social and practical skills, termed activities of daily living (ADL), which are essential for many pupils with ID, are not covered in the KP06 (Gomnæs & Rognhaug, 2012, p. 396). The KP06 emphasises oral, reading, writing, digital and numeracy skills as basic (Directorate for Education and training [DET], 2019a). Although little researched, the KL06’s utility for pupils with the most severe learning disabilities is questioned, as these
basic skills are reported to be unattainable learning goals (Horgen et al., 2010, p. 111). Common competence objectives and national standards for assessment presents regarding room for pupil diversity (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen 2011). A brief look at The national curriculum shows that it specifically addresses pupils with severe disabilities and suggests a holistic approach. It comprises areas of functioning such as motoric skills, communication and language skills, social skills, cognitive skills and daily living skills (Utbildningsstyrelsen [Finnish National Agency for Education], 2014, p. 73).

**Purposes of (special) education – Developing capabilities**

The question of purpose is essential to guide curricular choices. Theorising special education and inclusion from a capabilities approach, Reindal (2010) raises the issue of the purpose of inclusion: Inclusion in *what*? Parents send their children to school to be educated, not included, Reindal remarks, emphasising the provision of fundamental educational skills. For pupils with ID, employment and independent living are commonly referred to as post-school outcome measures (Ayres et al., 2011; Bouck, 2017; Alwell & Cobb, 2009). However, Black and Lawson (2016) discuss preparation for employment and independent living as the underlying ambitions for education in terms of the regulatory document for special needs education in England: the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department for Health, 2015). For some pupils, the authors argue, these ambitions might be inappropriate because of the nature of their special educational needs. Drawing on Biesta (2009), Pring (2004) and Dee et. al (2006),
Black and Lawson (2016) derive three main purposes for education for students with severe learning disabilities: 1) person-becoming, 2) later life/vocation and 3) citizenship (p. 6). They underscore that flowing through these different purposes, the most important educational experience for young people is support in living their own lives. This means helping them to clarify . . . “the style of life judged worth living” (person-becoming); “identifying the training and work that will enable one to live that life” (later life/vocation purposes); “questioning the ends and values embodied within it” (citizen purpose) and “acquiring the necessary skills and competences” (later life/vocational purposes). (Pring, 2004, p. 59, as referred to in Black & Lawson, 2016, p. 4)

According to Black and Lawson (2016), the person-becoming and citizenship purpose of schooling, which encompasses all young people, are essential, rather than restricting education to vocational purposes, exclusionary for some. In their book Inclusion is Dead. Long Live Inclusion, Imray and Colley (2017) critique uncritical mainstreaming of pupils with severe, profound and/or multiple learning disabilities. They argue that the inclusion agenda risks doing the opposite of its intention of justice when overlooking the specific learning needs and characteristics of this group. In contrast to a mainstream academic pathway, the authors argue that the approach for this group should be concerned with, for example, process – not just product, something concrete and contextualised – not abstract, holistic – not compartmentalised, open to variation and personalisation – not linear or generic (pp. 63–64). They identify cognition, communication, physical factors, care, sensor-motoric skills, creativity and citizenship as key curriculum components for these learners (p. 58). This is important; however, how special can a curricular approach be to justify it within school
systems that purport to be inclusive? Reindal (2016, p. 2) suggests the capability approach as a foundation for the values and human flourishing that inclusive education ought to initiate. Referring to Sen (1992), Reindal points out that central to justice and the meaning of inclusion is developing the ‘equality of what’ for all pupils – that is, the object of value is capabilities (p. 6). According to the capability approach, well-being and social justice should be conceptualised in terms of people’s capabilities to function; their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in and to be who they want to be. Together, these beings and doings, which Sen calls ‘functionings’, constitute what makes a life valuable (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). Thus, the combination of functions that one can achieve, and from which one can choose, reflects one’s capabilities and captures the potential for modes of human agency and flourishing (Reindal, 2010, p. 5; Sen, 1993, p. 31, referred to in Reindal, 2016, p. 6).

Agreeing with Imray and Colley (2017), this paper argues that the curriculum imperative for pupils with ID is to develop capabilities in a school system that allows them to do and be the very best they can. As Terzi (2014, p. 487) points out, fundamental educational entitlement consists of effective opportunities to achieve the basic educational functionings necessary for equal participation in society. In this regard, it is important to recognise that relative to the cognitive and adaptive variation associated with ID, the educative potential of given contents may vary. Thus, if by inclusion, we mean meeting even the most special needs, equal distribution of similar curriculum content undermines this very ideal. Accordingly, an essential task for curriculum decision-makers is to provide content with enough educative potential to
be acknowledged, learned and performed as valued functionings to strengthen individual participation in current and future valued environments – even if such content appears to be peripheral to a common standards-based curricula.

**Method and materials**

**Document selection**

The following documents were analysed:

1. Report 2014:7
2. Report 2015:8
3. White Paper 28
4. White Paper 21
5. ‘Core curriculum – Values and principles for primary and secondary education’ (2017)
6. ‘A guide to special needs education’ (hereafter, the Guide)

Policy documents are non-reactive, accessible and stable sources of data, and were in this study interpreted to elicit deeper understanding of the topic of interest as they are socially constructed in the documents (Atkinson & Coffey, 2008, p. 59; Bowen, 2009). This purposeful selection is assumed to represent the school policy discourse for 2014–2018, signifying the salient ideas, intentions and curricular approach framing education for this group (see Appendix 1 for details of the documents). This timespan comprises the starting point for the renewal of the KP06 and initiatives to change the special education system.
Norwegian official reports are written by government-appointed committees to investigate a specific area; they often precede white papers expressing official policy and recommendations to parliament. Report 2014:7 (MoER 2014) and Report 2015:8 (MoER 2015) by the Ludvigsen Committee had a mandate to recommend the renewal of school subjects for future society and working life (Report 2015:8, p. 14); this marks the starting point for the subject renewal and curriculum initiatives in White Paper 28 (MoER 2016). White Paper 21 (MoER 2017) concerns motivation for learning, early intervention and quality in school.

The Norwegian core curriculum (CC), renewed in 2017, holds a special position in this study, as it is the only document in the dataset to be prescriptive for educational practice as a regulatory binding part of the national curriculum to be implemented together with the renewed curricula in 2020/21 (DET 2019b). These five documents concern the entire school system, whereas the remaining two specifically concern special needs education. The Guide (DET, 2014) describes the entitlement and proceedings of special needs education; however, it is not issued as binding regulations to the Education Act (1998). The Nordahl Report (2018, p. 6) concerns pupils with support needs and was initiated by the MoER to contribute to quality in special needs educational provision and to create a basis for the authorities to choose the most suitable measures for inclusion. Although they have different statuses and functions, a common characteristic of these documents is that they are written by education authorities or government-appointed committees on school policy in Norway, thus comprising a school policy discourse. For this reason, although addressing education for pupils with ID, Report 2016:17 is not included in the dataset,
as it pertains to the Ministry of Children and Equality. Considering the ideal of inclusion in current school policy, to investigate how and to what extent pupils with ID and their educational needs are addressed within school policy discourse forms the main focus of this paper. In the conclusion, the utility of these seemingly parallel policy discourses on education for this learner group are discussed.

Content analysis and systematic word searches

Content analyses, a systematic method for making valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use, were conducted (Krippendorf, 2004, p. 18). The overall approach was qualitative, including some quantitative aspects. Overlapping with the research questions and to focus the readings, attention was paid to three themes across the dataset: (i) special needs education and special education, (ii) pupils with ID and (iii) the curricular approach. Special needs education (spesialundervisning) is a teaching activity anchored in legislation, whereas special education (spesialpedagogikk) refers to the academic field of knowledge. To investigate the relative attention paid to (i) and (ii) both in terms of content and extent, keyword searches and frequency counting were conducted in the reports, white papers and CC. Norwegian terms and synonyms assumed to locate the themes were used. The interpretative validity is exposed when translating Norwegian concepts into English. (Appendix 2 shows the search terms, strategy and numeric accounts of the search results).

When found to address special (needs) education\(^1\) and pupils with ID, textual excerpts were marked and memos recorded in PDF files and condensed into summaries in a collated table to extract salient ideas. The PDF versions of the documents were converted to Word format, and

\(^1\) Special needs education and/or special education.
with the help of a research assistant, word frequency counts were conducted using the Word search function. Each hit was examined for relevance by this author. The extent (frequency) to which the reports, white papers and CC referred to special (needs) education and pupils with ID was considered as indicative of the relative attention paid to the corresponding phenomena (Krippendorf, 2004, p. 59).

As the Guide and the Nordahl Report solely address pupils with support needs, word frequency counts were considered to be superfluous. Instead, they were read holistically to identify salient features regarding how special (needs) education and ID were addressed (i) and (ii) and to investigate whether any specific curricular approach was signified (iii). Following Graneheim et al. (2017, p. 30), the analysis moved from synthesising manifest content (i and ii) to analyses at a more latent level to examine what characterised the curricular approach (iii). However, there was no clear-cut line between interpretative and evaluative aspects. A broad focus was necessary to explore whether the documents mentioned ways of meeting the needs specifically related to pupils with ID; views of learning, teaching, curriculum content, methods or assessment and/or their alteration. An issue of this study’s validity is raised here. The readings and findings are necessarily situated within the specific analytic departure; however, abductive in nature, the purpose is to provide an argumentative analysis of the policy’s course of study for pupils with ID. Hence, the study attempts to explicate the background to contextualise the readings and findings to enhance validity (Krippendorf, 2004). The risk of omitting aspects that give a broader picture of the current policy landscape is acknowledged. Cumulative research on the issues raised is welcome.
Findings and discussion

Attention paid to special needs education and pupils with ID

The formal and statistical sides of special needs education are mentioned in Report 2014:7 (e.g. p. 27) and Report 2015:8 (e.g. p. 98). However, the systematic word searches revealed that overall attention paid to special (needs) education is low, with nine and two hits, respectively. Although there were some references to the teachers’ task of adapting education to ‘groups of pupils’ (e.g. p. 75), ID or related concepts such as learning difficulty or disability did not get any hits. White Paper 28 continues this feature, with no references to special (needs) education and with only one hit for ‘learning difficulty’, stating that learning outcomes shall be assessed irrespective of such (p. 58). However, closely connected to special needs education and frequently addressed throughout these three documents are the legal principles and processes of adapted education for all pupils, at 21 hits in Report 2014:7, 29 hits in Report 2015:8 and 25 hits in White Paper 28. The reports describe this as adapting teaching to pupils’ social, cultural and psychological prerequisites; age; experiences and level of pre-knowledge; interests; gender and ethnicity through varied methods and forms of organisation. Adaptation to cognitive prerequisites does not appear to be included, although one exception was found (Report 2015, p. 42). In general, these findings may indicate that in the policy formation for the ‘School of the Future’, the principle of adapted teaching holds a strong position, surpassing special needs education. One way to interpret this is that adapted education is understood as sufficient for meeting pupil diversity. However, pupil diversity in terms of variations in learning dis/abilities is barely visible, confirming Haug’s (2016) finding. Not highlighting groups in need of special support risks not recognising differences.
The mandate of the Ludvigsen Committee appears to be interpreted in a way that does little to illuminate pupils who, through special needs education, need to develop competences that will enable them to participate in society and working life, as noted in a public consultation response from the Faculty of Education, University of Oslo (2015, p. 1) and by Haug (2016).

Compared to the reports and White Paper 28, the attention to special (needs) education in White Paper 21 is vast, with 75 hits. For example, it underscores the poorer quality of current special needs education compared to ordinary education (p. 57), the need to strengthen special education competence in schools and schools’ responsibility for high-quality special needs education (p. 56). Further, it states that some students have impaired function (p. 58). White Paper 21 states that some pupils require special needs education throughout their entire schooling, but that helping them to follow ordinary education should be the aim for most of them (p. 56). According to White Paper 21, the MoER has appointed an expert committee (the Nordahl Committee) to analyse and suggest measures to strengthen inclusion and special needs education (p. 57). White Paper 21 explicitly mentions pupils with ID (p. 58), stating that the MoE should refer to the suggestions made in Report 2016:1 to the Ministry of Children and Equality in relation to the Nordahl Committee’s work.

The CC (2017) elaborates on the values and principles in the preamble of the Education Act (1998), guiding teaching and subject curricula to realise the broader purpose of education (p. 3). The CC emphasises human dignity, educational equality and considering pupil diversity (pp. 5–6). Further, it highlights pupils’ well-being and the need to meet all pupils with trust, respect and challenges that promote Bildung.
learning and self-efficacy (pp. 15–16). These are all promising commitments, as the CC as a regulatory curriculum document also encompasses special needs education for pupils with ID. However, it only explicitly mentions special needs education twice in relation to entitlement (p. 3, p. 17). There is no direct mention of the intended recipients of this provision. ID, learning difficulties, disability or any specific learner group typically in need of special support is not explicitly described. In a passage about ‘learning how to learn’ (p. 13), support adapted to the level of functioning is mentioned, but pupil diversity is generally described in terms of differences in experience, pre-knowledge and cultural and language diversity (p. 17, p. 6).

The CC also refers to adapted teaching many times as a practice that should preferably be carried out within the community to maximise the learning outcomes from ordinary education (p. 17). Adaptations of, for example, methods, are described, but a space for altering curricular content (i.e. qualitative differentiation) is not evident. What one may expect from adapted teaching or special needs education, or what these concepts mean, could or should entail to warrant pupils of various abilities ‘to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can master their lives and can take part in working life and society’ (Education Act 1998, Section 1); is not described in any detail in the CC. In sum, although the commitments are appealing, how this document can function as a guide for special needs education considering the learning needs of pupils with ID is unclear.

The Guide explicates the right to and proceedings of special needs education. Apart from the intention that special needs education shall ensure equal education (p. 9), the purposes of special needs education are not further elaborated upon. The Guide does not explicitly use the term ID or name any learner group in particular, instead referring to pupils
with severe ‘deviations’ (p. 72). Although generic rather than diagnostic terms seem more appropriate for describing differences in learning conditions, this terminology is striking. The Nordahl Report specifically refers to pupils with ID as a learner group several times, stating that they need equitable, individually adapted, continuous, high-quality education (p. 243). It goes on to state that the current special education system does not work, is exclusionary and is self-perpetuating (p. 7, p. 233). It problematises using unqualified personnel to teach pupils with special needs (p. 7), stating that a comprehensive restructured system for inclusive and adapted educational practice and competence is needed (p. 8, p. 233). Nevertheless, the role of special (needs) education in such efforts appears unclear. Its view on special education as a professional field, as a specific competence or the utility of special education endeavours in general all appear to be ambiguous (pp. 218–222, p. 228, p. 243). For example, it states that the agenda of the special education support system is to maintain its own professional interests (p. 227). A significant finding within the Nordahl Report is its recommendation to abolish the right to special needs education (p. 222).

**Summary – The weak position of special needs education**

In the policy formation of the ‘School of the Future’, one may expect pupil diversity, including various dis/abilities, to be made visible, and for special needs education to play a role. However, the documents related to the subject renewal (i.e. the reports, White Paper 28 and the CC) sparsely address special needs education and meeting pupil diversity. In contrast to the idea of inclusion as catering to all pupils,
education for learners with special needs seems to be issued separately from the main school policy discourse. Although it is promising that White Paper 21 clearly addresses pupils with ID and the need for long-term special needs education for some, it emphasises the mainstream track as the norm. It is positive that the Nordahl Report addresses pupils with ID and underlines the need for qualified personnel; however, it recommends abolishing the right to special needs education. How the educational needs for this already marginalised group of pupils will be met or warranted is not apparent. The Nordahl Report adheres to what is now emerging as a trend of adapted education for all being the prominent idea in current school policy, as reflected in common features in all the analysed documents of this study and consistent with Nilsen (2014). In so doing, the need for special education as a specific competence, as a knowledge field and as a teaching practice are overshadowed.

In the CC as a regulatory document prescriptive for practice, more explicit attention to pupils with variations in abilities could be wished for, including using terms that address those exact phenomena. If differences in abilities are not recognised at the policy level, this could lead to ontologically real learning differences not being addressed in practice. Currently, mainstreaming within national curriculum standards seems to be the situation for pupils with ID.

**Academic mainstreaming – Discussing potentials and pitfalls**

Given the low coverage of special (needs) education and pupils with ID in the documents related to the subject renewal, change in the current pathway for this learner group to develop competence for future society and working life is hard to detect. Similar findings are evident in the Nordahl Report; it is hard to find new measures or ideas for curricular
provision for pupils with ID or resonance with Report 2016:17 as encouraged by the MoER. Rather than clearly communicating an expectation for the national curriculum framework to be inclusive, with aims, content, methods and assessment systems geared toward diversity, the Nordahl Report describes the need for ‘deviation’ for some (p. 242, p. 244). Instead of contesting the current curriculum condition open up to what education is and can be, the notions of normalcy that can be discerned in the Guide and the Nordahl Report may contribute to maintaining the status quo in school policy for this group.

Nilsen (2017) problematises the strongly regulative common competence objectives for special needs education planning, practice and assessment, from which the following points regarding this stem. The Guide states that the need to ‘deviate’ from the KP06 may arise, but at the same time, it expresses that the KP06 forms the basis for special needs education and IEPs (p. 6, p. 18). The KP06 is expressed as the basis for assessment, both in the expert report from the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (PPT) and for grading, if relevant (p. 6, pp. 48–49). However, the Guide also stipulates that exceptions are possible (p. 5). Further, the passage ‘the objectives in the pupils’ IEPs shall not be used as a basis’ (p. 6) further guides readers toward the KP06. Alternative assessment systems for evaluating learning progress are not described.

With this background, the curricular approach for pupils with ID seems to be academic mainstreaming and adhering to a Western policy trend of access to general curriculum. The educational potential of an academic curriculum is rich if its contents enable the pupil to value and apply academic knowledge to his or her real-life current and future preferred life contexts. However, a question emerges if the current
standardised curriculum narrows the scope of education: What is valuable learning for pupils with ID? As long as the initial competence objectives in the KP06 are adjusted to a cognitive functioning typical for six years of age (the school starting age in Norway), the KP06 excludes those pupils working below or beside this threshold from the start. With that said, although the Guide states that the KP06 is the basis for special needs education, the need for ADL content for some pupils is acknowledged (p. 24), although its status and conceptualisation are unclear.

Functional life skills – A curriculum lacuna?

According to the Guide, objectives associated with pupils with ‘severe deviations’, personal care, communication, social interaction and valued roles and practical skills (i.e. ADL) might be relevant in their IEPs (p. 72). This is described as crucial support and learning, which, according to a number of jurisdictions (p. 24), they are entitled to. Nevertheless, the Guide states (p. 24) that ADLs are not embedded in what is usually meant by the term ‘education’, as expressed in the KP06, but they can be considered as education according to the Education Act (1998). Given that ‘participation’ is clearly reflected in the Education Act’s preamble, interpreting the following passage in the Guide is challenging: ‘aims related to participation are not in line with the Education Act’ (p. 71). Firstly, questioning whether developments in communication, social skills, etc. really constitute education or not leads us nowhere other than to the thorny issue of who is and who is not educable – a debate we abandoned in 1975. Developments in these areas are education for these learners. Recalling Freire’s (1970) spacious notion of education as emancipation, it is crucial that participation in any activity that stimulates agency is recognised. Secondly,
although the need for ADLs is acknowledged, how to operationalise or organise such content areas in sequential manners in order to teach them is not described. Thirdly, these content areas do not appear to be effectuated by requirements to assess progress. Consequently, ADL content has an unclear status. Moreover, how might teachers plan and assess special education in ADL?

Following Thompson (2017, p. 40), although nothing in policy prevents schools from teaching ADLs, progress in grade-level general education content standards may become a fundamental driver of what is taught. However, teaching a mainstream, neurotypical curriculum to children with special educational needs, especially those with severe learning difficulties, is under debate, and teachers report experiencing dilemmas and difficulties in doing so (Norwich, 2008, referred to in Imray & Colley, 2017, p. 21; Ware, 2014). Researchers are concerned that a trend of academic mainstreaming carries a risk of deriving IEP goals from a standards-based academic curriculum, annexing meaningful individualised and functional curriculum goals that are more directly tied to increased independence in identified current and future environments (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013, p. 519; Ayres et al., 2011, p. 12). To use Cigman’s (2001, p. 561) words, this trend may lead to ‘experiences of failure’ from exposure to high academic standards, undermining the self-esteem that is conducive to learning.

According to Bachman (2016, p. 36), current statutory Norwegian national assessment systems provide little scope for differentiation. NFU (2018) remarks that when exempted from subject curricula and grading, pupils with ID are subjected to discrimination when they are excluded from the national quality assurance system for
education. The void created when these pupils are exempted from national curriculum and assessment systems leaves them adrift. Sparse curriculum guidance and regulations may lead to random practices, making the content and quality of the education variable.

Put forward here is the claim that the current lacuna of life skills curriculum content, or signals to pursue this, may represent a risk of capability deprivation for pupils with ID – unrealised potential outcomes of functional life skills for adaptive functioning, participation and flourishing in valued communities. Moreover, a truly inclusive curriculum should hold no minimum admission requirements of a pupil’s cognitive or adaptive abilities. In this regard, what may represent a promising and spacious new navigation point, albeit not explicitly related to pupils with ID or special needs education in the documents, is the term ‘life skills’ as found in the CC (2017, p. 15). Emerging questions merit serious attention – life skills functional for whom? What counts as a life skill (and who’s counting)? Intrusive to unpack for pupils with ID, this carry potential for future curriculum development.

Concluding remarks and implications

This study evaluates the course of study taken in current Norwegian school policy for pupils with ID. The analysis shows a marginalised position of special needs education, sparse specific regulations and mainstreaming in a mainly academic approach to curriculum. The emphasis on adapted education seems to explain this. However, adaption within mainstream standards is a fairly thin offer to pupils with specialised needs, causing epistemic, ethical and practical dilemmas. In the policy landscape portrayed here, it is difficult to see how limited

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opportunities to choose and effectuate functional life skills content resonates with inclusion – if by inclusion, we mean meeting even the most special educational needs.

If there is a tenuous match between the child and the curriculum, what should guide special education practice? Following Terzi (2014) and Wood and Deprez (2012, p. 472), a school for all must aim for the equal distribution of capabilities – capability equality – providing all learners with the best possible educational experiences, enabling them with the competence to live the lives they have reason to value and expanding their opportunities for the various life paths they might take. Thus, enhancing schools’ capabilities to meet learners with ID correlates with a basic educational responsibility: enhancing pupils’ capabilities to encounter the world. At its best, special (needs) education makes this happen. Important suggestions to enhance education for pupils with ID are proposed in Report 2016:17. To promote inclusive school policy and the curriculum condition for pupils with ID, parallel policy discourses and professional communities need to unite instead of viewing education for pupils with ID as being separate from main school policy.

Given the study’s findings, renewed pathways for curriculum policy and research for pupils with ID is suggested. Firstly, materialising the ideals in the Education Act (1998) into curriculum for pupils with ID is pertinent. As Deng (2018, p. 371) points out, teaching is an interpretative act that calls for curriculum thinking centred on the ‘what’ (content) and ‘why’ (purpose) of teaching. Thus, research and innovation in curriculum models for pupils with ID is imperative. It is relevant to explore Finnish research and policy when building on best practices in Norway (see Kontu & Pirtimma, 2009). Pupils with ID and their teachers should be given rich
opportunities to choose and make systematic progress in curriculum content areas facilitating cognition, communication, social and practical skills, sensor-motoric skills, creativity and citizenship. Progress in these areas can, at its best, engender functional *life skills* that contribute to flourishing, mastery of own life and participation in communities and working life (as emphasised in the Education Act, 1998). As such, the presence of such content areas in a national curriculum may signify an inclusive educational policy.

Secondly, and as pointed out in Report 2016:17 (p. 13, p. 15, p. 17), curriculum standards, regulations and assessment in special needs education must be strengthened in order to express high aspirations, improve quality and to comply with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities approved by the United Nations in 2006. Although not explicitly related to pupils with ID or special needs education, the recommendation in Report 2015 to develop curriculum resources for teachers to adapt education for groups of pupils is interesting (p. 72). The SEND (Department for Education and Department for Health, 2015) and the Rochford Review (Standards and Testing Agency, 2016) on curriculum assessment for pupils with special education needs from the UK should be explored.

Current school policy purports to be evidence-based. Bouck (2017, p. 372) points out that although intervention studies indicate improved outcomes of academic skill attainment for this group, the research base is limited in terms of the relationship between the curricula received (developmental, functional, academic, etc.) and what leads to successful post-school outcomes. In this regard, and in a Norwegian policy context, more knowledge on the educational trajectories for this group is needed. The special education research field on education and curriculum for students with ID is small in Norway and may explain the limited amount of attention to this topic in current school policy. While knowledge on *what*
works is needed, at its core, education is an ethical-political endeavour. Values, curriculum theory and contextualist approaches are therefore essential modes of inquiry to further develop educational pathways for pupils with ID. The relationships between functionings and capabilities and the educative potential of various content requires further exploration. The capability approach may inform this to a much greater degree than what is outlined in this study.

What curricular approach to choose and what functionings to cultivate may vary across different needs and interests. Countless aims of education are possible, depending on what features of a worthwhile form of life are considered as being important to foster (Peters, 1973). This does not mean that ‘anything goes’ – the credibility of conclusions depends on the evidence and arguments in their favour. Hence, the composition of the groups recommending and deciding school policy is significant, at its best reflecting the interests of a diverse pupil population. In a School for All, it is vital that school policy and a national curriculum framework reflect diversity (including various dis/abilities) and pursue education as an enabling capacity for all pupils, offering whatever educational pathway fit for the purpose. The issue of content is not a matter of fact, it is a matter of choice. Thus, curriculum decision-makers, from IEP design to curriculum reform, must justify the pursued curriculum both for the individual and society, with education serving as an individual and collective good (Brighouse, 2009). The burden of evidence lies with those who have the power to choose.
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Declaration of interest statement

The author reports no potential conflict of interest.

Appendix 1 List of included documents and Appendix 2 Overview of the search strategy, terms and hits supplements this article.
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