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## **Joint Reflection on Action – a Prerequisite for Inclusive Education?**

### **A Qualitative Study in One Local Primary/Lower Secondary School in Norway**

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#### **Abstract**

The main theme of this article is teachers' experiences of how joint reflection and common follow-up practices impact on the development of inclusive education. The study was conducted using an adapted letter method, where the teachers at one school in Norway answered some open questions by discussing and formulating a joint text. The results suggest that the teachers, who have previously participated in a national programme of school development, seem to have developed a broad understanding of inclusive education that entails meeting the diversity of needs of all pupils. They do not only consider inclusion to be a matter of placement, but also something that involves a social and an academic communality. One important finding is that joint reflection in a sharing culture engenders common frames of reference for the practical actions of inclusion. Teachers' own experiences suggest that joint discussion and reflection also play a central role in the efforts aimed at the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs.

Keywords: Teachers' Collaboration, Inclusive Education, Special Education Needs

#### **Introduction**

This article aims to shed light on the following main issue: How does teachers' joint reflection on action impact on inclusive education? Joint reflection is defined here as collective

contemplation by teachers with a view to developing a common understanding of our research questions, enabling them to answer these questions through the formulation of a joint text.

In order to answer the main issue of the article, it is broken down into three specific research questions. The first research question relates to *how teachers interpret inclusive education*. The second question concerns *the teachers' views on the role of joint reflection in practical efforts aimed at inclusion*. The third question is more specifically related to *the importance of joint reflection for practical efforts aimed at the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs*. Earlier research suggests that this pupil group presents a major challenge to teachers' attitudes and creates challenges for practical teaching work (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011).

### ***Inclusive education – dependent on a common frame of reference for the teaching work***

Inclusive education has long been a core element of both the international and national education policy agenda. According to UNESCO (2009), inclusion in education can be considered a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all pupils, through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. This entails meeting the diversity of needs of all pupils through a differentiated education whilst also developing a community that enables all pupils to participate and experience a sense of belonging based on their aptitudes and needs.

Another key element is that inclusion is the responsibility of the regular education system. Everyone in the system, both school leaders and teachers, must therefore share the responsibility and feel an obligation to carry it out. It is also an individual responsibility, where teachers must consider it part of their duty to take responsibility for their teaching. This

applies regardless of which subject the teacher teaches and whether working in general education or special education.

UNESCO observes that the move towards inclusion often requires a shift in people's attitudes and values, and that teachers as well as leaders must be encouraged to reflect together on their practice in order to develop a better and common understanding of what inclusive education means and requires. Achieving inclusive education therefore depends on agreement between all relevant partners, both in terms of a common vision and on the various steps that must be taken to put the vision into practice (UNESCO, 2009). In our study, these relevant partners are all teachers from one school.

A common frame of reference and common follow-up actions in turn depend on teacher collaboration. Collaborative efforts must involve all teachers at a school, and therefore also the teaching team that, for example, teaches a class, such that inclusion is a joint project.

This view of inclusion is consistent with the important intentions in Norwegian schools. Inclusion is not only related to placement and organisational communality, it also entails pupils experiencing a social and academic communality within the comprehensive school (Tetler, 2000; Nilsen, 2017a). Today's intentions for an inclusive education are based on a long and gradual process, and have been part of the development of a unitary school system (Nilsen, 2010). Inclusion marks a transition from a phase characterised by integration, where, in a Norwegian context, particular emphasis is placed on pupils with special educational needs and on their ability to meet the school's common and predefined criteria in order to be transferred from a special school to the ordinary school (Vislie, 2003; Nilsen, 2010). Since 1980, the integration approach in Norwegian national curricula has gradually been replaced

by an inclusive approach. Inclusion as a fundamental principle of education was established in the L97 plan (Bjørnsrud and Nilsen, 2011). This took place parallel to the development in a number of other European countries, and as part of an international trend (Vislie, 2003).

Based on the intentions, it is a prerequisite for inclusion that all teachers – both general and special education teachers – understand this as a shared responsibility, and act in accordance with what this entails. Teachers therefore need to spend time on joint reflection with a view to developing a common frame of reference and to agree on common actions in the form of planning, implementation and evaluation of the education. This can create the basis for a unified practice, such that all teachers carry out different tasks with the same end goal.

### *Spending time together to reflect on and facilitate pupils' learning*

The theoretical frames of reference in organisational learning that are rooted in socio-cultural understandings have enabled the identification of the positive correlations between individual and collective learning (Wells 1999). Every teacher has both an independent individual role and a collective role in the teamwork with colleagues.

A basic premise of teaching work aimed at the inclusion of pupils is that experiences and knowledge are shared with colleagues, and not kept to oneself. To enable the sharing of knowledge, communities of practice need to be established, where knowledge can be reflected on and exchanged between participants (Wenger 1998). In a school, this work can be carried out by teachers at both the individual teaching team level and the entire teaching staff level.

The intensity of the process depends on collective reflections, participants' willingness and ability to work towards the same goal and the development of a systematic understanding of

unity and correlations in the organisation's work. In this way, common knowledge can be established and can help to shape the community's practice. Organisational learning is normally characterised by complex, unpredictable and uncertain situations. Individual and collective work among participants is meanwhile considered important for the development of competence. It is claimed that the participants' reflections in practice-oriented communities help to improve actions in the field of practice (Senge, 2006).

Organisational learning is also understood as a development of events over time in an interactive relationship. Participants must feel that they have leeway to reflect on practical choices, and they must be prepared to commit to the prioritisation of practical actions that is decided (Argyris and Schön, 1996). Such learning and development correspond well with the understanding of collaborative meeting platforms through the dialogue between teachers. Knowledge is developed through organised individual and collective reflection and action. A core element is that tacit knowledge is articulated and made visible in the collaboration (Hedegaard-Sørensen and Tetler, 2011). By doing so, organisational learning can help to create meaning in the work on inclusion and can facilitate better learning for pupils.

Collaborative learning in teacher teams constitutes a form of organisational learning, and enables those who participate to identify knowledge and actions of inclusion that they are unlikely to discover on their own. The individual experiences and individual knowledge are a prerequisite for the community being able to learn.

Little (1990) was one of the first researchers to examine the theme of teachers' learning and the power of the collective community. Collective learning in teams paves the way for joint

planning with preparation, a common language, observation in the classroom and new ideas with actions for pupils' learning.

Nevertheless, it is far from definitive that collaborative learning serves as a good and constructive educational culture of sharing. Teamwork can have the effect that the main point is to avoid conflicts, and experiences may be evaluated without reflecting on pupils' learning. No questions are to be asked in the community about the learning content or the goals and methods of the teaching. Reflections aimed at developing pupils' learning processes can threaten the hierarchy and harmonic relationship of the community. This is a school culture that does not provide a potential for learning (Tingleff Nielsen, 2012).

Conversely, Engstrøm (2001) examines whether conflicts in collaboration can lead to an adaptation of competence development, which in turn leads to expansive learning. The system or the culture of the participants in an activity is such that they have different experiences, stances, opinions and work tasks, thereby fostering learning and development.

When transferred to teacher teamwork on inclusion, different understandings or perceptions of a topic can act as a driving force in the system and thereby bring about collective efforts aimed at learning. New ideas and themes that are introduced may be at odds with teachers' previously established practices. At the same time, such professional conflicts can be a source of new learning and change.

Constructive teamwork partly entails the joint development of the "incomplete" professional space that will eventually emerge. The solutions are not known in advance and the teachers participate in a process in which they think, affect and act together with others. Trust,

reciprocity and equality between the participants are pivotal to the interaction (Bjørnsrud and Engh, 2012).

***Teacher collaboration creates common frames of reference for adapted education and special education***

While inclusive education is an approach that seeks to address the learning needs of all children, a specific focus on those who are most vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion is needed (UNESCO, 2003). Reviews of international studies suggest that teachers' attitudes to inclusion can vary considerably, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs. A review article published in 2002 showed evidence of positive attitudes, but provided no evidence of acceptance of a total inclusion or a "zero reject" approach to special educational provision (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Most teachers seem to have a positive attitude to the general philosophy of inclusive education, but are far more reticent when the impact and demands of inclusion on their teaching practices are considered in more detail. Another review article from 2011 revealed that the majority of teachers in regular primary education hold neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. They do not consider themselves to be very knowledgeable, and do not feel competent or confident in educating pupils with special needs (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011).

The OECD (2003), however, works on the principle that educating pupils with special educational needs is a matter for the whole school, not just for individual teachers. This builds on the principles of The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which emphasised the importance of teacher collaboration and shared responsibility for the education of children with special needs. This statement specified that "the educational team, rather than the



individual teacher, should share the responsibility for the education of special needs children”, and it was emphasised that inclusion depends on collaboration between class teachers and support staff (UNESCO, 1994, p. 24).

Research in the Norwegian context, however, suggests that teachers’ degree of collaboration and coordination in special education and general education varies, and is often rather limited. The general education teachers report that special education teachers are not very involved in devising work plans for pupils with special educational needs. Meanwhile, the special education teachers say that the class teachers are seldom involved in formulating IEPs, and that they have limited knowledge of IEPs and don’t take account of these when devising work plans. Both of these approaches limit the opportunities for coordinating the education for pupils with special needs (Nilsen, 2017b). Such tendencies can be clearly illustrated through the subject of mathematics, where class teachers in mathematics and special education teachers for pupils with special needs in mathematics do not seem to collaborate to any great extent (Gillespie, 2016).

International research indicates that collaborative school cultures, where the teaching work is characterised by mutual support, joint work and broad agreement on educational values, represent a good setting for learning, for both teachers and pupils (Gruenert, 2005). An important outcome of teacher collaboration seems to be that teachers learn how to improve their instructional practice, and this in turn is positively related to pupil achievement (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Schools that can be identified as collaborative consequently seem to have greater success with pupils, and these results hold up in schools that include pupils with special educational needs (Cook & Friend, 2010; Mulholland & O’Connor, 2016). A review of research shows a positive correlation between

teacher collaboration and achievement of pupils with learning disabilities (Mattatall & Power, 2014). Thus, research supports the notion that collaboration between general and special education teachers is pivotal to improving the educational practice that meets diverse learners, and for the successful inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in general education classrooms (McLaughlin, 2002).

## **Method**

### ***Adapted letter method***

Our collection of empirical data is based on an adapted letter method and is linked to qualitative or interpretative research methods. In the study, a combination of individual and collective processes is facilitated for teachers to write letters or narratives in response to open research questions. The letter method can be used to learn more about what individuals and groups in a workplace think based on their evaluations (Berg et al., 2016).

This is an adapted and structured process that provides empirical data in the form of text on the teaching staff's reflections and actions vis-à-vis the focus of this study (Bjørnsrud and Engh, 2012). One advantage of this method is that teachers are generally good at expressing themselves in writing. The writing in this context requires thorough joint consideration and formulation of answers to the research questions. Through the open questions, the teachers are able to give their answers using their own words and formulations. A weakness of this method may be that people with strong opinions might dominate the group. In our information to the teachers, emphasis was placed on the value of everyone having their say and actively taking part in the process.

With regard to the researcher's role, it is vital that they remain as neutral as possible and do not show any obvious support or opposition that can influence the informants (Creswell, 2013). At the start of the study at the school, we distributed a short text with the research questions and a brief introduction on how the collection of empirical data would take place. The text included the following:

“We want every teacher to initially spend up to an hour reflecting on the three questions. Feel free to use “keywords” or complete sentences when the individual teacher answers the questions. You will then meet up in teams for at least two hours, when you will discuss the individual answers and arrive at a common frame of reference.” The teams then wrote a joint text on a PC in response to each of the research questions.

Themes, correlations and challenges that exist in the content can be identified by analysing the teachers' texts. Texts based on reflections will show both the possibilities and obstacles (Bruner, Feldmann, Hermansen and Molin, 2006). This method has provided the study with empirical data that reflects the participants' own voice and their own written word in the context of the answer to the study's research questions. Creating text from empirical data is a practical way of identifying patterns and correlations among the respondents through analysis and categorisation (Patton, 2002). Our understanding of the entirety and the parts of the texts is marked by a hermeneutic interpretation that captures categories based on the patterns found in the analysis of the texts.

More specifically, this means that the analysis of the teachers' texts through coding and categorisation is primarily based on our research questions. The coding and categorisation thus frame our main categories. Secondly, our analysis based on the teachers' texts serves to

frame the sub-categories that are formed under each main category. The analysis is therefore based on the combination of an inductive and deductive strategy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and the coding and categorisation are both conceptually and empirically driven (Gibbs, 2007).

In our interpretation of the content in the answers, patterns and themes emerge that are sorted into various categories that provide answers to the main problem: How does teachers' joint reflection on action impact on inclusive education? The results of the analysis will be discussed in the context of relevant theory in the conclusion and the concluding discussion.

### *The school in the case study*

The school in the study is one local primary/lower secondary school in Norway. It was selected using the purposeful sampling method, with a view to securing an information-rich case in order to provide in-depth answers to the research questions of the study (Patton 2002). The school took part in a national programme for the development of lower secondary schools, and this is how we as researchers got to know the school. Through this work, it emerged that the teamwork of teachers at the school was constructive. We found this school's previous experience with teamwork aimed at inclusion to be highly relevant to our research questions and also to be well suited to gaining greater insight into the phenomenon being studied.

The pupils at the school are in years 1-10, and there is a total of 210 pupils. The school is organised into five teaching teams divided into primary, intermediate and lower secondary levels. There were 36 teachers at the school, all of whom participated in the study. The study is based on voluntary participation, by individual teachers and teams. Emphasis was placed on anonymisation in order to protect the identity of the school.

The analysis is based on one letter from each team. In the analysis, the teams have been named according to the level they belong to. The analysis shows clear similarities between the teaching teams in how they responded to the research questions. We have chosen to illustrate the main and sub-categories with quotes showing typical statements, with a certain distribution between the teams.

## Results

In this part of the article, the results are presented from the study of teaching teams in the reference school. The presentation of results is arranged into three main categories that correspond to the three research questions. Based on the teachers' responses, different sub-categories are created under each main category in order to break down the results further. An overview of the correlation between research questions, main categories and sub-categories is given in the table below.

**Table 1 The correlation between research questions, main categories and sub-categories**

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Main categories</b>	<b>Sub-categories</b>
How teachers interpret inclusive education	The teachers' understanding of inclusive education	Inclusion encompasses all pupils – not just some  Inclusion as an organisational community  Inclusion as a social community  Inclusion as a trade-off between academic communality and individual adaptation
Teachers' views on the role of joint reflection in practical efforts aimed at inclusion.	The importance of joint discussion and reflection for practical teaching work on inclusion	Joint reflection creates common frames of reference  Joint reflection engenders a sharing culture

<p>Teachers' views on the importance of joint reflection for practical efforts aimed at the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs.</p>	<p>The importance of joint discussion and reflection for the work on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs</p>	<p>Teamwork fosters the exchange of experiences and ideas, and the apportionment of responsibility</p> <p>Teamwork fosters common knowledge, a common understanding and a common learning path</p> <p>Joint discussion and reflection fosters a comprehensive educational provision</p>
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### *The teachers' understanding of inclusive education*

By analysing the data in the light of the first research question, we will gain insight into the teachers' understanding of what inclusive education entails. This forms our first main category. Four sub-categories emerge from the analysis.

#### *Inclusion encompasses all pupils – not just some*

To start with, some of the teachers call attention to a restrictive understanding of inclusion that they have previously experienced as normal, namely that it primarily relates to pupils who receive special education. Inclusion will thus be understood as having “a focus on pupils who have IEPs, or those undergoing a mapping process and/or an evaluation process” (year 9 team). The teachers recognise that this is a group of pupils who may be in a vulnerable situation and who need a great deal of attention vis-à-vis inclusive processes. Nevertheless, the teaching teams have a clear perception that the principle of inclusive education encompasses all pupils, regardless of abilities and aptitudes. One of the teams consequently remarks that inclusion must endeavour to ensure that the education is “accessible for all pupils in all pupil groups” (year 8 team).

### *Inclusion as an organisational community*

A material element in the teachers' understanding of inclusive education is that it entails all pupils participating in an organisational community, i.e. that they are taught not only in the local school, but also in an ordinary class. One of the teaching teams expresses, for instance, that "one of the key factors for us is that all pupils are in the classroom for the vast majority of the time" (year 10 team).

At the same time, the teachers emphasise that this is not just a matter of placement, but must also entail all pupils having the experience of "belonging to a group or class" (years 1-4 team). This also points in the direction of the importance of the social community.

Although, in principle, the teachers believe that all pupils should be part of the class community, they make reference to some challenges and possible limitations. This primarily relates to pupils with disruptive behaviour. Such pupils may be perceived as disrupting the education of others in such a way that they destroy the pupil community. One of the teams describes this as follows:

We have examples of pupils who will be regarded as such a disruptive force in the class that the desire for pupils to be in the classroom as much as possible will be difficult to implement out of consideration for the other pupils. (year 10 team)

This implies that the teachers perceive some of the pupils in this group to be a major challenge in relation to the wish for everyone to be in the same class, and that the

organisational frameworks and expertise used to address this type of challenge are not always sufficient.

### *Inclusion as a social community*

Within the organisational community that makes up the school, the teachers express that it is important that pupils also experience being part of a social community. One of the teaching team's comments illustrates this point:

They will not only be in the same place as the others in a physical sense, but will be part of the “community”, such as the group, class and school as a whole – a place where they are included, and feel that they are included (years 1-4 team).

It emerges from the teaching teams' texts that successful inclusion is dependent on the pupils' *perception* of being included. They must feel that they are included: inclusion is about “getting the pupil to feel like part of a community, both academically and socially” (year 8 team). When they expand on what this experience entails, the teachers use terms such as “being included”, “being accepted”, “belonging to”, “valued”, “of equal value” and “being seen”.

Inclusion is seen as being dependent on good social relations, not only between teachers and pupils, but also among the pupils. Some teachers point out that it is important that teachers are “good at teaching positive attitudes, so that pupils become adept at including each other”. (year 8 team)

### *Inclusion as a trade-off between academic communality and individual adaptation*



The teachers recognise that the organisational inclusion, the fact that “everyone is in”, naturally “must lead to diversity in the teaching” (year 10 team). The diversity of abilities and aptitudes must be addressed with a balance between considerations to academic communality and adaptations to the teaching.

On the one hand, the teachers say that inclusion is about “getting the pupil to feel like part of a community, both academically and socially” (year 8 team). However, the teachers make it clear that inclusive education must not be understood as a community based on the same education or the same standards. One of the teams makes the following observation:

This does not mean that everyone should do the same thing all the time; there must be the scope for pupils to have different needs, different opinions. Everyone should be seen and be given opportunities to do the work in their own way and at their own level (years 5-7 team).

Against this background, the teachers also underline the great need for adaptation of the education. They express that the “great diversity in the class will naturally lead us to endeavour to use multiple learning strategies in the classroom”. Thus, the teachers stress the necessity of variety in the education in order to address the pupil diversity. The need for different forms of variation will depend on the pupils’ aptitudes. One of the teams emphasises this as follows:

Pupils with academic challenges will often benefit greatly from the “supplementary strategies” beyond the “ordinary blackboard teaching”. This includes visual and auditory approaches, and such like. This will mean that all pupils are introduced to a

wider range of learning strategies and will consequently have more opportunity to discover which strategy is the best one for them (year 10 team).

Such adaptation naturally requires “you to know the pupils so well that you know how to interact with them in the teaching situation” (year 8 team). Knowledge of and consideration to individual learning abilities are thus considered the linchpin of practical action choices aimed at inclusive education.

### ***The importance of joint discussion and reflection for practical teaching work on inclusion***

Based on the analysis of empirical data under the second research question, we gain an insight into the teachers’ views on the significance of joint reflection for practical work on inclusion. This analysis of this main category is divided into two sub-categories.

#### *Joint reflection creates common frames of reference*

The teaching teams emphasise that joint reflection is essential for developing common frames of reference for inclusion. Such common frames of reference in turn are considered important for common strategies in the practical work of inclusion. One of the teaching teams makes the following observation:

We can learn from each other by discussing and reflecting on challenges and needs, with a common goal of facilitating pupils’ inclusive education (years 1-4 team).

A key factor for the teachers is that collaboration develops common frames of reference for the pupils’ learning. Such common frames of reference are constantly being developed, and

can never be considered complete. It also emerged that teachers in the community consider it a strength to address issues of individual pupils in order to identify which practical solutions should be used.

*Joint reflection engenders a sharing culture*

The teachers are finding that joint reflection helps to develop a culture of sharing that strengthens the basis for the work on inclusion. One of the teaching teams expresses this as follows:

Discussion and reflection in teams or with subject teachers in the class about how to think about and implement inclusion and adaptation becomes part of the sharing culture and the exchange of experiences that can be mutually beneficial, and much can be learned by all sides (years 5-7 team).

It emerged from the teachers' responses that the culture of sharing contributes to joint reflections that give the teachers a common understanding and direction for future practical work on inclusion:

The exchange of experiences is one of the strengths of working closely together in a team, and as an extension of this exchange we can identify the importance of how joint reflection and discussion aids the practical teaching work with a view to pupil inclusion. In purely practical terms, it can be related to what methods work for a particular pupil, what is needed to capture the interest of another, or a third pupil's perception of how he/she is seen in class. (year 9 team).

Thus, the teachers feel that the exchange of experiences contributes to joint reflection, which impacts on the practical teaching work on the inclusion of all pupils.

*The importance of joint discussion and reflection for the work on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs*

This main category refers to the third research question, which is more specifically aimed at the implications of joint reflection for practical work on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. This analysis is divided into three sub-categories.

*Teamwork fosters the exchange of experiences and ideas, and the apportionment of responsibility*

It emerges from the interviews that teachers feel that collaboration is needed between the different teachers of pupils with special educational needs in order to address these pupils' needs and to include them in the education. These pupils spend much of their time in regular classes, and are dependent on the collaboration of teachers with responsibility for special education as well as general education.

The teachers emphasise that this requires teamwork, for example with all teachers for a class or for a year – class teachers, subject teachers and special education teachers – meeting for joint discussions and planning. Such teamwork aids “the sharing of experiences and ideas for the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs between team teachers” in such a way that it is perceived as “informative” and “useful” for the work of all teachers (years 5-7 team).

In the teachers' experiences, teamwork provides a forum and an arena for discussions on shared responsibility for special education challenges in relation to inclusion:

The team structure gives us teachers a common arena where we can discuss special education measures and plan for optimum inclusion in the daily school life (year 9 team).

In order for it to work this way, several of the teachers think it is important that the teamwork has a regularity to it, and they therefore state that “fixed, allotted times for discussion and reflection should be given priority, in the best interests of the pupil”.

*Teamwork fosters common knowledge, a common understanding and a common learning path*

The teachers report that teamwork is essential for all teachers being able to develop and contribute to common knowledge on the pupils’ aptitudes – both their strengths and weaknesses – and for gaining an understanding of how well pupils perform when with others. Common knowledge and a common understanding in turn are considered to be vital to ensuring that the work of different teachers in the same class and with the same pupil represents a common learning path, with everyone working towards the same goals. If this is not the case, there can be negative consequences for the teachers’ overall effort. One of the teams made the following observation:

If time and space are not created for joint reflection and discussion, we may thwart each other’s progress (years 1-4 team).

Teamwork is therefore considered important in terms of the implications for the follow-up of pupils. It is recognised that the development of a “common understanding” and a “common learning path” among teachers is very important vis-à-vis pupils with **special educational** needs. In the teachers’ experiences, these pupils constitute “a vulnerable group” that is more

dependent on “continuity, predictability and safe frameworks” than other pupils. Having a teaching practice that is unified to the greatest degree possible can therefore “be critical to optimal development” (years 1-4 team).

Such a unified practice applies, inter alia, to the planning of the educational provision, for example in relation to considering what goals would be most beneficial for the pupil. Conversely, the lack of a unified practice could create conflicts, which in turn could have an adverse effect on pupils. The teachers stress that “a common understanding can lead to a better approach and improve the communication in the relationship with the individual pupil”.

*Joint discussion and reflection fosters a comprehensive educational provision*

Collaboration and joint discussion are considered essential to how the team works on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. This applies, inter alia, to planning through the use of IEPs, where the follow-up and implementation of the plan is dependent on the involvement of all teachers who teach the pupil. “This will help to ensure that the document does not become redundant.”

Thus, the teachers feel that teamwork leads to a greater sense of ownership between everyone who teaches the pupil. This in turn is considered crucial to a comprehensive follow-up of each pupil, both through special and general education. Teamwork can strengthen joint strategies and prevent “solo driving” by teachers who “go it alone”. This applies to the challenges that the pupils face in the different subjects:

We can discuss the pupils’ challenges with each other (...) By doing so, teachers do not keep information about a pupil and their understanding of the pupil to themselves.

(...) In addition, we can work more closely and develop a better understanding of the pupil's challenges, which can differ according to the subject (year 10 team).

In other words, the teachers also consider teamwork to be a vital factor in developing joint reflection and joint actions for practical work on inclusion – and perhaps especially so in relation to pupils with special educational needs.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

Overall, the results indicate that the school in the study has come a long way in developing a common understanding among the staff of what an inclusive education entails. It also seems to put a lot of emphasis on joint discussion and reflection in the teaching teams with a view to developing the practical teaching work aimed at inclusion of the pupils. The fact that we find clear similarities in the responses from the teaching teams suggests that the school has developed a common culture in this area.

The adapted letter method used in the study is based on individual and collective work aimed at finding answers to the open questions. This method is in keeping with individual and collective efforts to create learning in organisations (Wells, 1999). The sharing of knowledge takes place in communities of practice with a view to identifying experiences and knowledge between the participants (Wenger, 2004). The participants' reflections in the community create opportunities for actions in practice (Senge, 2006). The work process of the teachers releases and highlights experiences and knowledge that emerge from the responses (Bjørnsrud and Engh, 2012). This type of methodology is about identifying themes, correlations and challenges that exist in the participants' texts (Bruner, Feldmann, Hermansen & Molin, 2006).

### ***The teachers' understanding of inclusive education***

The teachers at this school seem to have developed a broad understanding of what inclusive education entails. In line with both the international (UNESCO, 2009) and Norwegian context of education policy (Nilsen, 2010), they have moved away from the narrow interpretation in which inclusion only encompasses pupils with special educational needs. Instead, they recognise that inclusion is about addressing the diversity of needs of all pupils. The broader understanding also manifests itself in how they do not simply regard inclusion as a question of placement, but also as something that entails social and academic communality. At the same time, they are acutely aware of the need to balance the academic communality with individual adaptation. The teachers recognise that inclusion cannot be based on an equal education, and work instead on the basis of an equitable education.

### ***The importance of joint discussion and reflection for practical teaching work on inclusion***

One important finding is that joint reflection engenders common frames of reference for the teaching work and the subsequent practical actions of the team.

The teachers show a common understanding of teamwork as previously referred to (Little 1990; Bjørnsrud and Engh, 2012). When sharing cultures for learning are established among teachers, discussions and reflections tend to take place that make the work on inclusion valuable and actionable. The teachers' interaction in the school culture helps to create common frames of reference for the facilitation of pupils' learning within the team. The teachers' competence is developed through sharing experiences of planning, implementing and evaluating pupils' learning. In this way, common knowledge can be established and can help to shape the community's practice. (Senge, 2006).



Questions are raised in the teams about individual pupils and the working methods used in the teaching. Reflections on developing pupils' learning for inclusion seem to be prominent in the teams' daily work. Collaboration and discussions on their own and their colleagues' experiences and knowledge are used as a tool for improving actions in practice (Wenger, 1998).

Another important finding is that the sharing culture at the school reflects a different and clearly more positive teamwork than that previously referred to by Tingleff Nielsen (2012). In our case study, reflecting on the pupils' learning seems to be a core element of the exchange of experiences. There is no evidence in our empirical data to suggest that there are conflicts in the community that creates development (Engstrøm, 2001). It seems more the case that the sharing culture as it currently stands provides enough leeway for understanding each other's point of view in the work on inclusion.

***The importance of joint discussion and reflection for the work on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs***

While the teachers at this school recognise that inclusion seeks to address the learning needs of all pupils – which is in line with the understanding that has been developed internationally (UNESCO, 2009) – they are also aware of the need to focus on pupils with special educational needs; a group that is particularly vulnerable in terms of segregation and marginalisation (UNESCO, 2003). In line with The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the teachers regard inclusion as a shared responsibility of the entire school, and consequently as an approach that all teachers must take part in through collaboration. Whilst earlier studies show that many teachers seem to have neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with special needs (Avmaradis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer, Pijl & Minneart, 2011), the

findings of this study show that the teachers at this school have a positive understanding of how this group of pupils is part of the teachers' shared responsibility. This signifies a possible change of attitudes over the period. The change in attitudes may be linked to the fact that prior to the study (and as discussed in the section on methods), the school participated in a national programme aimed at developing a more inclusive school. Participation in the national programme seems to have given the teachers constructive experiences with teamwork and joint reflections aimed at inclusive approaches, which in turn has helped to foster a teamwork culture in the school. This implies that inclusive attitudes and practices need time to develop, and are dependent on collective involvement and active experience by all teachers. This is consistent with indications from earlier research, namely that teachers who have already implemented inclusive programmes, and therefore have active experience of inclusion, possess more positive attitudes (Avmaradis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000).

The teachers' own experiences suggest that joint discussion and reflection is a core element of the work on the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. Since these pupils spend most of their time in general education, the teachers at this school recognise that the general and special education teachers need to work together to plan and implement the pupil's educational provision. Teamwork is considered to foster the exchange of experience and ideas between all teachers who teach a pupil with special educational needs. As found by Mulholland & O'Connor (2016), the implementation of teacher collaboration is dependent on different framework factors that can create both limitations and opportunities. At this school, such framework factors have been developed by school administrators as part of the school's participation in the national development programme. This may have had a practical significance on teachers' opportunities for teamwork. The teachers at the school express that teamwork forms the basis for the allocation of responsibility and counteracts the denial of

responsibility. Thus, inclusive practices will be influenced by the teachers' ability to carry out professional reflections within the context that characterises the culture of the school (Hedegaard-Sørensen & Tetler, 2011).

Teamwork is considered to foster common knowledge and a common understanding, with all teachers following the same learning path for the pupils. Teachers particularly consider joint discussion and reflection to be vital to ensuring that pupils with special educational needs receive a comprehensive educational provision, in which general education and special education are coordinated (Nilsen, 2017b; McLaughlin, 2002). This is particularly manifested in the planning and implementation of IEPs, which the teachers consider to be a matter of concern for all teachers, and not solely the responsibility of special education teachers. All teachers must take responsibility for and ownership of these processes in order to prevent fragmented learning for these pupils.

Overall, this school seems to have made good progress in developing a collaborative school culture (Little, 1990), where the emphasis is on joint reflection, and has developed shared attitudes and collaboration on inclusive education. However, a dilemma may arise in cases where the teachers find that the collective role in the teamwork is so strong that it eclipses the independent individual role and the freedom to act that every teacher also wants. The balance between the individual and the collective role (Wells, 1999; Wenger, 1998) and the significance of this for inclusive attitudes and practices should be the subject of further research.

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