Successful Inclusion of Adolescent Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities - Conditions and Challenges within a Mainstream School Context

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Abstract
The present study examined the conditions and challenges of successfully including adolescent students with mild intellectual disabilities within a mainstream school context. The study was based on qualitative interviews with nine special education teachers who worked in special education groups in lower secondary schools. A thematic structural analysis was performed to identify themes. The need for an overarching inclusive philosophy at school and adequate organizational, social, and academic facilitation were considered essential conditions for successful inclusion. Organizational constraints, inadequate facilitation and a lack of self-confidence among students were identified as challenges. Successful inclusion was found to depend on extraordinary engagement among special education teachers due to a lack of support and commitment in the school organization. The fundamental objectives of the successful inclusion of students with mild intellectual disabilities within a mainstream school context requires a basic monitoring on all levels of the school organization, i.e., management and the entire school staff—including general education teachers. However, students' own experiences and perceptions of inclusion are considered the greatest indicators of success.

Keywords: *adolescent students, inclusion, lower secondary school, mainstream school context, mild intellectual disabilities*

Introduction
        The Norwegian school system has an overarching goal to include all students successfully. According to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), inclusive education refers to the responsibility of mainstream education to adapt to all children,

regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other constraints. Community affiliation is deemed to be a matter of course (Tøssebro, 2004), and each individual is recognized as an equal participant. The goal of inclusive education is to provide all students an experience of community and belonging and the right to learn the same curriculum as classmates their age (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). A modification of this objective is defined as the attempt to educate students with special needs by integrating them as closely as possible into normal structures of the educational system (Michailakis & Reich, 2009).

Inclusiv education comprises three different dimensions: a physical/organizational dimension, a social dimension and an academic/cultural dimension (Nilsen, 2008). Each of the three dimensions further consists of an objective and a subjective aspect. The subjective aspects are students' evaluations of the objective aspect of each dimension, i.e., the degree of inclusion they experience. The physical/organizational dimension is related to location, e.g., the extent to which students are placed in a mainstream school, in proximity to typically developing students in the classroom and outdoor areas. The social inclusion dimension is the extent of students' experience of belonging, cohesion and fellowship at school. The academic/cultural dimension is the extent to which the school succeeds in creating fellowship and simultaneously adapting the training content. The operationalization of the concept of inclusive education thus emphasizes criteria for what a qualitative good education should entail. These criteria may thus constitute a basis for assessing the extent to which inclusion has been successful.

According to Farrell (2000), inclusion in a school context enables students to take part fully and actively in the life of the mainstream school, to be valuable members of the school community and to be considered integral members of it. According to the current definition, inclusion presupposes a responsibility for the community; thus, inclusion assumes reciprocity. However, inclusion involves facilitation in many different areas. Mitchell (2008) refers to different structural changes to make this happen, such as adaptation of curricula, teaching methods, assessment techniques, physical facilitation, and accessible teacher support.

Although mainstream schools in Norway intend to include all students, there are alternative solutions, such as separate special education schools or special education groups within the mainstream schools. In accordance with Norwegian law, all parents have the right to send their children to their local school (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016). For several reasons, many parents of children with special needs prefer inclusive education in a mainstream school. One of the main reasons is the opportunity for their children to interact with their typically developing peers (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & van Houten, 2009; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008; Siperstein & Parker, 2008). Parents expect that inclusion is primarily intended to offer increased opportunities for peer interactions. In some cases, parents also determine inclusive education to be the most favorable solution regarding their children's school performance (Gasteiger-Klicpera, Klicpera, Gebhardt, & Schwab, 2013). As long as children receive sufficient support, inclusive education is often preferred (Elkins, van Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003).

Several studies have been conducted to examine the possible impacts of inclusion on academic, functional and social development among students with special needs (Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, 2014; de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Wendelborg and Tøssebro (2011) note the importance of social benefits for all students and highlight that segregated solutions may hinder social

participation among peers. However, with age, social interactions between students with intellectual disabilities and their typically developing peers become less frequent (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Compared with primary school, secondary school is more interactive both socially and academically, in terms of the structure and focus in teaching (Rosetti, 2012). It is claimed that the teaching structures in regular classrooms at higher levels of schooling increase academic engagement among students with intellectual disabilities; however, it has been found that such students are nevertheless frequently unengaged in the instructional activities that take place in regular classrooms (Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008). The focus of a school appears to contribute to increasing the academic gap between students (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). Several research studies have demonstrated how in a number of cases, inclusion may to be limited only to the physical/organizational dimension (de Boer et al., 2013; Laws & Kelly, 2005; Nilsen, 2008; Pijl et al., 2008).

Presence and proximity are necessary conditions for social inclusion to be successful. The teacher plays an important role in facilitating social interaction among students with and without disabilities (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Rosetti, 2012; Siperstein & Parker, 2008). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion appear to be of crucial importance. Teachers may function as vital supporters; however, extensive support and close assistance have also been shown to prevent social interaction in regular classes (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). An awareness of the use of support is thus needed.

Placement in regular classes is widely considered a requirement for successful inclusion (Ferguson, 2008), but it alone is not sufficient for inclusion to succeed. Students' own experience is thus an essential criterion for assessing the success of inclusion; cf. the subjective aspect of inclusion (Nilsen, 2008). It is not given that all students with learning disabilities prefer to learn in regular classrooms at all times, particularly if they do not receive adequate support (Brackenreed, 2008). Optimal inclusion thus appears to involve certain dilemmas (Michailakis & Reich, 2009), but we know that proximity to peers is an important prerequisite for social interaction; establishing social relationships across and to bring common learning about (Feldman, Carter, Asmus, & Brock, 2016; Koster et al., 2009). Facilitating optimal inclusive practice may thus seem to be challenging.

Critics argue that mainstream education has failed to respond adequately to students' inequalities (Ainscow & Cèsar, 2006; Ferguson, 2008). The placement of all students within common areas in mainstream schools has not always been accompanied by sufficient organizational solutions, changes in curricula or amendments in teaching strategies. In some cases, a basic understanding of inclusion established in schools' organizational structure seems to be absent. Prerequisites for success appear to depend on education based on an overall inclusive philosophy, in which the instructions are adapted to individuals' learning abilities (Nilsen, 2008). Inclusive education also seems to be more successful in contexts with a culture of collaboration that helps promote joint problem solving (Courela & Cèsar, 2004) and seriously considers students' points of view (Vaugn, Elbaum, & Boardman, 2001). For inclusive practice to be successful, Mitchell (2008) identifies numerous conditions that must be fulfilled: a common vision, placement in age-appropriate classrooms, adapted curricula, adapted assessment, adapted teaching, acceptance of the underlying idea of inclusion, adequate access, and sufficient support and resources. Leadership is also emphasized as being significantly important. In this context, leadership refers to management at all levels, and leadership must be able to explain the underlying philosophy and show through their actions that they are committed to achieving successful implementation. However, successful inclusion also depends on

teachers' ability and motivation to work with people with special needs (Michailakis & Reich, 2009). Without dedication and commitment to the underlying idea of inclusion, it may be difficult to facilitate inclusive education.

Previous studies have noted various conditions that must be met to achieve effective inclusion. However, research has insufficiently described the perspectives of special education teachers regarding the various challenges involved in ensuring a quality education for students with special needs in an inclusive mainstream school setting.

The present article describes part of a previous study of peer relationships among adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities, in which teachers, students and parents were invited to participate (Sigstad, 2016, 2017). In the interviews, teachers shared information regarding their experiences with the inclusion of these students within a mainstream school context. The data are considered essential and valuable for further analysis.

From an educational perspective, this article illuminates what special education teachers responsible for students in special education groups experience as the prerequisites and constraints of successful inclusion within a mainstream school context. These teachers' own descriptions of an inclusive school are analyzed through the lens of the following research questions: What conditions are necessary for the successful inclusion of students with mild intellectual disabilities in lower secondary school, and what limits the opportunities for inclusion within such a mainstream school context?

Method

The study focused on students with mild intellectual disabilities who were attending lower secondary schools in Norway and was designed in the form of qualitative in-depth interviews with nine teachers of these students. Mild intellectual disabilities were defined according to The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th revision (ICD-10) (World Health Organization, 2016).

The Sample and the Selection Process

To strengthen education for students with special needs, special education groups are occasionally organized within mainstream schools in Norway. In these cases, students are educated partly in these groups and partly in regular classes. Belonging to such a special education group in an ordinary school was chosen as one selection criterion. This allowed for including special education teachers of adolescent students who had relationships with peers both with and without intellectual disabilities. Special education teachers belonging to special education groups in four ordinary schools were invited.

The researcher made initial contact with the heads of special education at each school. Then, informational meetings were held for the special education group teachers. The schools provided feedback on 13 potential teacher interviewees. Teachers in the special education groups were asked to provide an information sheet about the project to the students and the parents concerned. Teachers, students and students' parents were asked to give permission for the teacher interviews by sending one reply form directly to the researcher.

Nine teachers from three schools responded to the inquiry (seven women and two men), ranging in age from 25 to 65 years. In two of the schools, the teachers taught partly in special education groups and partly in regular classes. In the third school, the teachers performed all their instruction in special groups. All teachers but one was qualified as

special education teachers or general teachers. In this study, all respondents are called special education teachers.

The Interviews

The interviews were conducted at school. The study involved nine interviews, each of which lasted approximately one and a half hours. The interviews were taped on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interviews were completed. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide with predetermined issues but with openness to new topics that might emerge during the interviews. Based on research questions from the original study about peer relationships among adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities (Sigstad, 2016, 2017), examples of predetermined themes were as follows: the students' social participation and well-being at school in the special education group and at school in general, what the teachers did to facilitate social interaction between the students, the teachers' opportunities to influence the facilitation of peer interactions, and current barriers in relation to the facilitation of peer relationships in the school context. Topics regarding opportunities and limitations for successful inclusion were additional information that emerged and appeared to be particularly relevant in the interviews and thus were assessed as relevant topics for analysis in this article.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2016) and approved by Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, 2016). The respondents were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw from the project at any time. In addition, the respondents' statements were anonymous in terms of names, dialects, positional information and other recognizable characteristics.

Data Analyses

The analysis was conducted by a data-driven process. The primary material consisted of interview dialogues with the teachers. The current data analysis within present article is only reserved for the topics including opportunities and limitations for successful inclusion. A thematic structural analysis was conducted to identify themes (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Using condensed descriptions, attempts were made to capture the essential meaning of lived experiences. The meaning units were further condensed into sub-themes, which were assembled into themes (see table 1).

Table 1. Examples of a thematic structural analysis (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) - interviews with the special education teachers

Meaning unit	Condensation	Sub-theme	Theme
T: It's hard to benefit academically in a regular class. At the lower secondary level, the academic gap starts to be quite large. They need individual adaptation, and it is difficult to achieve adequate support within the classroom.	Challenging dilemma – Academic discrepancy – Individual facilitation	Inadequate facilitation	Constraints of achieving successful inclusion
T: Inclusion is inspiring. I could never only have a special education group in a	Teacher engagement	Good facilitation	Conditions of successful

small room by myself. I enjoy being in the ordinary school life. If you will succeed in including students, primarily, you have to be included yourself in the teacher collegium.			inclusion

A thematic analysis of the level of self-understanding based on the respondents' own thematizing is used to present the qualitative empirical data, as described in the Results section (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The empirical findings are further discussed on an overarching theoretical level (Discussion). The thematic analysis was used to identifying implicit and explicit ideas within the data material (Meaning units in Table 1). Themes were seen by similarities across the data that were important to describe the phenomenon. The process was done by generating initial codes (by Condensation of Meaning units), searching for themes among codes (Sub-themes), reviewing sub-themes, and defining and naming main-themes (Themes). To improve the trustworthiness of the study, the interpretations were presented in sub-themes and themes in line with the transcriptions from the interviews, and with help of clarifying discussions with colleagues, further discussed from several perspectives throughout the analysis. The remaining data collected from the interviews with students and parents (Sigstad, 2016, 2017) were also used to strengthen the credibility of the teachers' interpretations.

Results

The special education teachers' descriptions of the conditions and challenges of the successful inclusion of students with mild intellectual disabilities in lower secondary school were categorized into two themes: conditions of successful inclusion and constraints of achieving successful inclusion. The findings presented below are divided in accordance with these two main themes. Quotes are used to exemplify the themes from the conversations.

Conditions of Successful Inclusion

The conditions of successful inclusion included four sub-themes: inclusion as a core value, organization that promotes inclusion, good facilitation, and awareness of student-specific conditions.

Inclusion as a Core Value

The rooting of inclusion as a basic idea within the whole school community seemed to be a crucial prerequisite for inclusion to work. Inclusion as a core value initially applied the school's management and its basic philosophy for education, but such positive values also seemed to influence special education teachers' attitudes.

The importance of an overarching vision of inclusion within school management was highlighted as a force for inclusion. In one case, the school principal emphasized that students with special needs enriched the entire school. Such attitudes thus helped increase the opportunities for inclusion.

Inclusion as a core value in the school community also appeared to affect teachers' attitudes and their daily work in teaching. One teacher emphasized that successful inclusion was conditional on teaching with a focus on social interaction: "I think inclusion

is all about social interaction. The most important thing is to get in touch with the other students. They cannot be sitting by themselves within small groups all the time; it becomes a poor quality of life."

Organization that Promotes Inclusion

Certain organizational prerequisites seemed necessary for successful inclusion. Inclusion presupposed a physical presence; thus, locations were essential. For two of the three schools, the special education groups were partly isolated from the other classrooms. The special education teachers described this location as limiting opportunities for successful inclusion. On the other hand, the teachers stressed that the students needed to be organized in small groups as a condition for successful inclusion in a mainstream school context. Belonging to a group of likeminded individuals was highlighted as an essential factor for well-being within such environments: "Within a special education group, they have several potential friends. I am quite sure that the special education group is a very good structure and a crucial condition for well-being."

Good Facilitation

In various ways, inclusion was dependent on good facilitation in general. It was all about an awareness of finding adequate common avenues of inclusion, compliance in teaching topics in regular classes and in special education groups, and facilitation with a focus on social interaction. However, adequate facilitation presupposed close teacher collaboration and teacher engagement.

Special education teachers selected certain lessons in the regular classes that they deemed best suited for inclusion. Frequently, in those lessons, academic qualifications were not so significant: "The lessons that are best suited for inclusion are instruction involving joint activities that do not require high academic competence but primarily have a focus on social interaction." As much as possible, the special education teachers attempted to prepare their students on the relevant education subjects before they entered the regular classes in according to one of the special education teachers: "We try to teach the same material within the special education group before they enter their regular classes so that they may be better equipped to participate."

Good facilitation and academic compliance in teaching within regular classes and special education groups was dependent on close teacher collaboration. One of the teachers highlighted as follows: "It requires quite a lot of teacher collaboration. I am included in the planning in the regular classes, as well. We have team meetings together, even though it is challenging to participate in team meetings for all three grades!" The special education teachers noted certain teacher-specific characteristics that could help promote inclusion. These qualities focused on the teachers' involvement and special obligation with regard to the vision (i.e., inclusion). Successful inclusion depended on extraordinary engagement. One teacher emphasized clearly such an involvement:

Inclusion is inspiring. I could never only have a special education group in a small room by myself. I enjoy being in the ordinary school life. If you will succeed in including students, primarily, you have to be included yourself in the teacher collegium.

Awareness of Student-Specific Conditions

Inclusion depended not only on teachers' facilitation but on an awareness of students' individual needs. The teachers had a particular focus on the students' individual

needs: "Inclusion in regular classes depends on the students themselves. There are always the needs of the students, which govern the need for support."

One of the teachers emphasized that the opportunity for successful inclusion could be a matter of students' ability to be independent: "If the subjects are too theoretical, it is completely wrong. However, inclusion within practical subjects works if the students have a certain degree of independence."

Constraints of Achieving Successful Inclusion

In the current study, the constraints of achieving successful inclusion included three sub-themes: organizational constraints, inadequate facilitation, and lack of self-confidence.

Organizational Constraints

In addition to the challenges that appeared to be caused by human limitations, there were organizational constraints of achieving successful inclusion. In several cases, the special education teachers underlined the physical location of the room that housed special education groups was a limitation for social interaction with the other students: "We are slightly isolated on campus; thus, there is no close contact. There are not many meeting points with the others."

Likewise, an overall common organization of the timetables was frequently lacking and represented a real challenge to achieving inclusion according to one of the teachers: "We have our activities in the special education group, and we really want to work inclusively and based on themes, but it is difficult because of challenges in the timetables." Some special education teachers also lacked additional resources: "We have worked extensively to achieve better inclusion, but it is not easy, and there are no extra resources reserved."

Inadequate Facilitation

Constraints in achieving inclusion frequently also appeared to be related to inadequate facilitation and insufficient teacher engagement. First, this revolved around insufficient academic arrangements. One of the special education teachers emphasized the lack of adaptation:

I want a better facilitation of teaching to ensure that the students with special needs are academically included in the regular classes. They often are assigned two desks back, or maybe a desk at the front. They have a numerous bad experiences. It is difficult to be in the classroom when none of the others do turn to them.

A lack of facilitation was often related to the overall academic focus in teaching, with overly high academic expectations of students: "The limitations are about the academic ambitions of the mainstream school. You cannot lose anything. And the teachers' adjustment revolves around the curriculum, grades and exams. It is a completely different focus."

The special education teachers experienced an increasingly challenging dilemma regarding the growing academic gap and the need for individual facilitation: "It's hard to benefit academically in a regular class. At the lower secondary level, the academic gap starts to be quite large. They need individual adaptation, and it is difficult to achieve adequate support within the classroom."

The limitations of teacher cooperation between the special education teachers and the general teachers were also an obstacle to success: "We have teacher collaboration, but it is not so permanent. We have shared time on Mondays, and the other teachers have planning time where we can be invited or we can invite ourselves to attend. But there is an obstacle: they are not so focused on all other students." However, constraints in achieving successful inclusion might be due to a lack of ambition and insufficient engagement. Some of the special education teachers emphasized that inclusion in regular classes was suited only for the cleverest students. One teacher indicated that a lack of inclusion could be caused by insufficient involvement of the teachers: "Successful inclusion requires more organization. You need to have a fundamental inclusive understanding as a part of your job. The effort does not always get rewarded in cash."

Lack of Self-Confidence

Challenges in inclusion were due not only to a lack of facilitation but to specific limitations of the students. These constraints were related to psychosocial factors and academic difficulties. Students had low self-confidence due to previous bad experiences, which were a common problem:

In sixth and seventh grade, it becomes really visible that they do not master as much as the others. They are struggling with bad self-confidence. Thus, it is highly difficult to motivate the students to participate in their regular classes.

A lack of academic confidence was a cause for participating in regular classes, and inadequate academic benefit was also a real experience for several students:

They find it difficult to participate in mainstream teaching lessons. The teachers are talking too fast, writing too much on the blackboard, and using difficult words. They are anxious about being asked questions they are not able to answer. They are spending more time having stress about it than listening to what is being said.

The teachers described that their students with intellectual disabilities experienced being outside the community. A lack of involvement and interest among the regular students prevented the school from fostering successful inclusion: "They do not want be with their regular class. They have no relation to the others, and when they might participate only four times a week, they are regarded as weird, and they get a sense of being outsiders."

Discussion

In the discussion of the conditions for successful inclusion in a mainstream school context, key themes were found to be particularly relevant: inclusion as an overarching philosophy in school, necessary organizational arrangements to adapt to individual needs, academic/cultural and social facilitation depending on extraordinary engagement, as well as an understanding of students' own experiences as current indicators of success.

Teachers' descriptions of the constraints they faced in achieving inclusion will hopefully contribute to illustrating the necessary nuances and facilitating reflection in the discussion.

Inclusion as an Overall Philosophy

In the present study, the school's overall core values were emphasized as relevant conditions for successful inclusion. The anchoring of inclusion as a basic idea in the school appeared to be crucial. The school management's basic philosophy for education functioned as a management tool. Those ethical principles had also an impact on teachers' dedication and commitment to inclusion in terms of being an overall objective in their efforts. Inclusion as an overall fundamental perspective seemed to be a basic prerequisite for success. Inclusion of all students, according to the original definition, means that every student has an obvious place in the school and that the education is adapted to their individual learning abilities (Nilsen, 2008). In the school community, such a common vison is essential (Mitchell, 2008). However, school leadership has a particular responsibility with regard to explaining the fundamental philosophy for everyone involved. Simultaneously, they have a responsibility for ensuring implementation is successful. A positive school ethos associated with proactive leadership has also been demonstrated in previous research to be a significant factor in establishing inclusive learning environments (Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013).

However, successful inclusion also depends on teachers' own dedication and motivation (Michailakis & Reich, 2009). In the current study, the teachers' commitment and willingness to be included in the collegium of teachers was highlighted as a prerequisite to the successful inclusion of their students. In contrast, a lack of ambition and insufficient involvement among teachers were identified as particularly relevant barriers in this context.

A basic understanding of inclusion appears to demand commitment and efforts at all levels in the organization. Schools must able to respond positively to the diversity among students and assess the individual differences as opportunities to enrich the education for all those involved (Ainscow & Cècar, 2006).

Necessary Organizational Arrangements Adapting to Individual Needs

The successful inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in a regular school requires organization, which may involve factors concerning location, time schedules and teacher resources. In this study, the special education teachers were particularly concerned about the physical location of the students with special needs in relation to the other students in the school. In two out of three cases, the special education classrooms were isolated from the other classrooms. Moreover, the students spent only part of their school time in regular classes. Creating class schedules that ensured shared time and fellowship among all students could be a challenge. Some teachers also emphasized that the school did not have sufficient teacher resources to facilitate successful inclusion.

A school that includes all students presupposes a community in which there is space for each individual (Tøssebro, 2004). The basis for the present study was the perspectives of teachers in charge of students with intellectual disabilities who belonged to smaller groups within mainstream schools. Students' time was divided between lessons in special education groups and lessons in regular classes. In some cases, the majority of instruction occurred in special education groups. If the purpose of inclusion is for all students to develop social interaction and to achieve an academic community, the

classroom locations and lesson distributions reported by teachers in this study may have been suboptimal. We know that proximity to peers is of essential significance for establishing social relationships and improving academic competence (Feldman et al, 2016; Koster et al., 2009). However, inclusion understood only as the physical localization of students in the same classroom has been shown to be inadequate with respect to the students' dividends (Ainscow & Cèsar, 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Some of the special education teachers in the present study stressed that belonging to a special education group was just a prerequisite for students' experience of wellbeing in a mainstream school setting. This viewpoint was based on the students' need for belonging in a smaller context with likeminded individuals.

In many cases, an inclusive school is understood as the placement of all students in regular classrooms for all classroom instruction time (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). In this sense, the organization of schools in the current study was not the optimal solution. According to Mitchell (2008), such a partial organization in mainstream school cannot be defined as full inclusion; rather, it is integration. Full inclusion assumes that all criteria are met. In a Norwegian context, the school system has recognized the need for establishing more so-called segregated solutions within school communities (Nilsen, 2010). A crucial discussion point has revolved around the relationship between adapted education within regular classes and the need for special education, often outside regular classrooms. Such practical organizational solutions challenge the objective of full inclusion in school. Nevertheless, physical distance, a lack of coordination of time schedules, and lack of teacher resources should not be obstacles to achieving successful inclusion. It is not guaranteed that presence in regular classrooms ensures students' inclusion (Nyborg, 2011). Nevertheless, in several cases, adapted special education outside the regular classrooms may be the optimal solution. The overall aim may be to attempt to achieve the best possible organizational, academic and social inclusion for each individual. To that end, access to the school community seems to be essential.

Academic/Cultural and Social Facilitation Depending on Extraordinary Engagement

Successful inclusion in school involves social, academic and cultural aspects of teaching. When the physical and organizational conditions have been met, the question is about the extent to which the school creates an environment to facilitate strong academic and social inclusion.

In the present study, this applied to lower secondary school students with mild intellectual disabilities. Strong facilitation revolved around the identification of suitable inclusion avenues, cooperation on common teaching topics in regular classes and special education groups, and adaptation with a focus on social interaction. Although teachers attempted to achieve the best possible academic inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, social interaction with typically developing peers was the primary goal. However, successful inclusion was conditional upon strong teacher collaboration and commitment.

We know that lower secondary school is characterized by increased academic requirements, objectives and evaluations (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Students this age are in a challenging stage of development characterized by self-development and insecurity, and thereof less attention to peers and their needs (Brown & Clute, 2003). In this context, inclusion of all students may be particularly challenging. In the present study, the special education teachers underlined the academic discrepancy between the students as an

essential challenge. The challenges were associated with the overall academic focus in school, expressed through the other teachers' academic ambitions and the high expectations for students' academic performance. The teachers felt that they were not able to provide the students adequate support inside the classroom. To address these challenges, the special education teachers attempted to select appropriate lessons within regular instruction in which academic qualifications were less relevant. They also tried to follow up with the same teaching topics in the special education groups that were taught in regular classes. They hoped the students were thus able to be more prepared to take part in ordinary lessons. However, successful inclusion in regular classes was dependent on close teacher collaboration. Inclusive education has been demonstrated to be more successful in contexts with cultures of qualitatively good collaboration (Koster et al., 2009). Achieving well-functioning cooperation in practice could be challenging given the time-consuming nature of such collaboration, based on the engagement of each teacher. The teachers stressed the necessity of cooperation but emphasized that possible limitations could be due to lack of dedication or time.

Inclusion in a regular class also seemed to be guided by the education focus among the general teachers and the typically developing students. The special education teachers had to ensure the adaptation of the students into the community within the regular classes. They attempted to facilitate inclusion via engaging in collaborative meetings, preparing for lessons in advance and prioritizing additional support to the students in the classroom. The special education teachers' efforts to make this happen thus seemed to be dependent on an extraordinary commitment.

The academic and cultural dimension of inclusion is related to the school's success in creating fellowship and simultaneously ensuring the adaptation of the training content (Nilsen, 2008). In the present study, the responsibility for inclusion appeared to be slightly fragmented: The special education teachers had been assigned responsibility for "their" students, and their efforts were intended to ensure the best possible inclusion for these students. Thus, the responsibility seemed to be restricted in view of the other general education teachers. The question is whether a lack of commitment to the idea of inclusion was due to negative experiences of being the sole bearer of the responsibility. In the case of a school with an overall inclusive philosophy, inclusion was implemented into the school practice only to a small extent.

According to Mitchell (2008), successful inclusion depends on structural changes in education. In addition to physical arrangements and adequate teacher support, he refers to the need to adapt curricula, teaching methods and assessment techniques. In the present study, the special education teachers provided limited information on the need for such adjustments. Their statements primarily concerned their efforts to adapt learning in regular classes by making preparations for small groups in advance. Thus, both the academic and the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities mainly seemed to be conducted on typical developing students' terms. However, such an education practice is common at higher levels in school, even when students with intellectual disabilities are involved (Carter et al., 2008).

Student's Experiences of Being Included – Current Success Indicators

Social inclusion involves students' experience of belonging, cohesion and fellowship in school (Nilsen, 2008). The essential criteria to assess the success of inclusion are also dependent on students' own evaluation of their experience of being included.

In the current study, the students' perspective was examined through special education teachers' point of view. The study is limited as such. Nevertheless, the teachers helped illuminate students' situation in an inclusion context. A lack of self-esteem due to negative prior experiences was a common problem. Several students preferred not to participate in their regular classes; they experienced being outside the community, and the academic dividends were inadequate. However, the special education teachers stressed that successful inclusion was dependent upon sensitivity for the students' individual needs. In this study, the special education teachers demonstrated that successful inclusion depended on their own dedication and effort to make it happen.

According to Ainscow et al. (2006), the goal of inclusive education is to give all students an experience of community and belonging and the right to learn the same curriculum as their peers. However, in accordance with Farell (2000), the question is whether inclusion really is a human right in significance of being an education for all. With such an overarching objective of inclusion, there may be a risk that individuals' needs are overlooked; thus, inclusive education is not very successful.

Methodological Limitations

The present study was limited by the sample size. However, the sample included nine in-depth, richly descriptive interviews in which the participants highlighted the contemporary problems in this field. It is important to emphasize that these findings are described based on the perspective of special education teachers employed within special education groups. To varying extents, their students were involved in inclusive classes. Therefore, the present study may provide only a limited focus and an outside perspective on inclusive education. The special education teachers illustrated the intentions to include all students in a mainstream school context and described what may be considered success for students with intellectual disabilities in lower secondary school.

A natural question may be whether the findings of the current study would have differed if a different sample had been used. It is possible that special education teachers who spent all their time in regular classrooms would have given different responses regarding the extent to which the school succeeded in the full inclusion of all individuals. Likewise, other views of inclusion issues—such as those of school management, general education teachers, and students—could have been useful.

Nevertheless, the current study presented rich descriptions of how the special education teachers interviewed perceived the opportunities for achieving the successful inclusion of adolescent students with mild intellectual disabilities within a mainstream school context. Further research is needed. These findings provide examples of key issues that may form the basis for new questions within research studies in this area.

Conclusion

In many ways, adolescent students with intellectual disabilities in lower secondary school appear to be an appropriate target group for discussing the current issue. With age, the requirements for academic competence and an adequate level of development become increasingly greater. For students with intellectual disabilities in lower secondary school,

the distance from their peers increases, and the academic and the developmental gap increases correspondingly. In view of an inclusion perspective, the growing gap between students appears to require a greater level of integrity in terms of the school's value-based foundation. Including a student group that differs both academically and socially from the majority may thus challenge the success criteria for inclusion in a particular way.

This study referred to essential conditions that must be in place to make inclusion successful. In essence, the study indicated the need for an overarching inclusion philosophy at school and adequate organizational, social, and academic facilitation as essential conditions. Finally, the students' own perception of inclusion was highlighted to be of significant importance. Thus, the conditions for successful inclusion appear to be interrelated. Fundamental core values associated with inclusion in a school organization are likely not to be adequate unless the objective is followed up with by school management in terms of appropriate organizational solutions, the support and guidance of the school staff, and the facilitation of academic instruction and social interaction. Students' own experiences and what they consider to be the best arrangement for them ultimately indicate the extent to which the inclusion has been successful.

The special education teachers attempted to facilitate the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into regular classes, although the operation involved numerous challenges. In these cases, it appeared that the school lacked sufficient follow-up on several levels. This study highlighted the increasing academic and social differences between students in lower secondary school and noted the current challenges of the ultimate goal of full inclusion. Inclusion required extraordinary engagement among the special education teachers and appeared to be only their responsibility; they did not experience sufficient involvement from the other general teachers.

This study also stressed the importance of seriously considering students' perceptions. However, the primary issue is whether the full inclusion of lower secondary school students with intellectual disabilities in a mainstream school context necessarily requires that the students constantly be taught alongside their typically developed peers. Successful inclusion is dependent on overriding values in school, in school management and in the practical implementation at all levels in general. However, successful inclusion assumes that organizational, social and academic/cultural conditions are present. Unless the school's teaching aims capture students' individual needs and views, the inclusion has failed.

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