Towards inclusive schools: a study of inclusive education in practice

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The purpose of this study was to examine how one teacher manages to include students with special needs in an ordinary classroom. We describe how she attempted to achieve positive academic and social outcomes for students in the classroom, and especially how she handled a boy with impulsive and uncontrolled behaviour. Data collection was carried out by means of observations, video recordings and interviews. The theoretical framework was based upon sociocultural theory; and the main themes were cognitive learning processes, social learning processes and collaboration processes. Important concepts in this connection are caring, dialogue, scaffolding, other-regulation and self-regulation.

Keywords: Inclusive practice; Differentiated; Academic and social outcomes; Social outcomes; Collaboration

Introduction

In recent decades, the view of special education has changed in western cultures. Rather than segregating children with special needs in separate classes and schools, the ideology of inclusive education has taken hold. Inclusive education is about fitting schools to meet the needs of all pupils. This means that the educational system is now responsible for including a large diversity of pupils and for providing a differentiated and appropriate education for everyone. None the less, the transformation of the ideology of inclusion into practice appears to be a major challenge in many countries (Hughes et al., 1996; Clark et al., 1997; Haug et al., 1999; Flem & Keller, 2000). Hence research on how teachers and schools cope with the diversity of students is needed.

As special education has been influenced by various ideologies, there are many ways of understanding how teaching should be realized: to understand the changes taking place it is important to look at special education as a social/cultural phenomenon. The
educational system is influenced by the knowledge traditions, values and attitudes in society. Rather than focusing on the individual child, the trend is now towards a more comprehensive and contextual approach. Traditionally, children with special needs were considered to have individual functional disorders. Now, the tendency is to look upon children with special needs as having a mismatch between cultural expectations and the child’s ability to communicate and meet those expectations (White Paper No. 23, 1997–8). In other words, the cultural expectations create the problems for the child. If inclusive education is to succeed, then we will need re-education, reorganization and value change (Stangvik, 1998).

New approaches to research in the special needs field are necessary. To help us understand how schools can respond to diversity and support the learning of all their students, we can turn to detailed classroom research, which is a relevant methodological approach. Investigating how schools in practice cope with the diversity of students is challenging because classrooms are complex places and the contexts and people are unique (Ainscow, 1998). However, studies on how teachers and schools are coping with ‘adapted’ education have interest and may lead to a deeper understanding of the processes involved in including children with special needs in ordinary classrooms (e.g. Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995; Ware, 1995; Clark et al., 1997; Ainscow, 1998). Our aim is therefore to focus on a learning context that, in our view, has succeeded in including children with special needs in an ordinary classroom context. We found Ruth in our search for such a context: we visited her class, observed what went on there and came to the conclusion that what she was doing, in terms of inclusion of children with special needs, warranted further analysis. Thus, Ruth became our collaborator in this study of inclusive practice. We describe in this paper what she had done to achieve inclusion on all fronts—cognitive, emotional and social—for all her students in the classroom, and especially how she handled a boy with impulsive and uncontrolled behaviour.

Theoretical framework

If pupils are to receive adapted education, it is obviously important to understand how children learn and develop. Given the significant role that the social environment plays in children’s development, it was a natural choice for those of us involved in research on inclusive education to use Vygotsky and his successors as our theoretical framework in order to understand the complex world of the classroom. This tradition, often referred to as the sociocultural approach, emphasizes how social and cultural factors influence children’s learning and development. Higher mental functions and social skills are learned through participation in social interactions from early infancy and throughout life. Vygotsky was especially interested in language as an instrument for the development of higher mental functions. Like Vygotsky, Bakhtin was concerned with the relationship between language and human development, and both agreed in many of their fundamental views. Bakhtin’s theories indeed provide an insightful supplement to Vygotsky’s theory. This theoretical framework is reviewed and described in the presentation of our results.
Methodology

Research context

We invited several people to recommend teachers whom they thought had succeeded in achieving inclusive practice for children with special needs. We observed the recommended teachers and, after some reflection, we invited Ruth to be our collaborator. She had 20 years’ experience as a teacher in an urban school in a medium-sized town in Norway. This primary school, with two classes at each grade level, comprised of students aged from six to 12 years. The school had 340 pupils, and 30 of these had special educational needs.1 All of them were educated at their own neighbourhood school because the school’s aim was to include all students with special needs. Ruth was currently teaching a class of 23 seventh-grade students, 12 girls and 11 boys, who were about 12 years old. There were three students with special needs in the class, two boys and one girl—Jon, Jens and Janne. The biggest challenge was provided by Jon, who had to cope with many problems, both in and outside the school. At school, his behavioural problems were considered the most serious, as his uncontrolled behaviour resulted in severe problems in interacting with others. Jon also had learning difficulties. His academic problems especially related to mathematics and grammar, but Ruth believed that this might be a result of his lack of concentration. The other boy, Jens, was also impulsive and restless, and sometimes experienced difficulty in staying focused. Jens did not share with Jon the same uncontrolled behaviour, but also had reading and writing problems. Janne too had difficulty with her concentration, but did not share the boys’ impulsive and restless behaviours. However, she was considered as having severe learning difficulties.

Because the school we joined was an open school, there were two parallel classes occupying the same area. The other seventh-grade class also had three students with special needs. The two classes shared a special education teacher, a support teacher and two assistants. They worked as a team and, in many ways, the two classes functioned as one because the teachers took responsibility for all the students in the two classes. The special needs resources were used in a flexible way and all the children in the area shared by the two classes received assistance when needed. In addition to assistance provided by the extra personnel, Ruth also received support from a psychiatrist specializing in children with severe behavioural problems.

The two classes followed the same procedures and rules, sharing common year and weekly plans. Each day started with a morning assembly in what was called the ‘listening-corner’, or ‘home base’. The pupils faced Ruth and the blackboard where she normally introduced the topics they were going to work on during the next two hours. The listening-corner was always used when new material was introduced. Later, the students returned to their permanent groups to work. There were clear rules of behaviour that the pupils had helped to draw up—for instance, in the listening-corner the pupils were required to raise their hands when they wanted to speak. Jon could not always follow the established rules, so Ruth currently tested him to see how he managed while sitting in a slightly secluded position in the listening-corner, where he was also part of the class. Like the rest of the class he was included also in a permanent
group. Jon, however, was better able to concentrate on his work when he sat in a slightly secluded position. These arrangements appeared to be functioning; the adoption of clear procedures and rules for the class ensured that each day proceeded in a straightforward manner and was predictable.

**Data collection and data analysis**

We joined Ruth and her class from the beginning of November to early March. Data collection was by means of observations, video recordings and interviews. The interviews with Ruth were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, while sections from the video recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data material included the year plan and the weekly plans for the class. In our observations we focused on Ruth’s interactions and communication with her pupils, but also on Jon’s interactions with Ruth and other children in the class. Ruth’s interactions with Jon exemplified many of her measures to achieve an inclusive practice.

When presenting what was going on in the classroom, a large amount of data material had to be analysed and systematized. The initial data analysis was undertaken immediately after each observation and video recording. We discussed what we had seen and used this as the basis for the forthcoming interviews. We maintained, in addition, a continuous dialogue with Ruth throughout the project, sharing our observations and analyses with her.

Central to this study are factors that influence learning: the main themes we named cognitive learning processes, social learning processes and collaboration processes. Cognitive learning processes are used to examine how Ruth scaffolded and assisted the students in their learning tasks, while social learning processes focus on the way Ruth structured the setting to facilitate positive social interactions, especially for Jon. Important concepts in this connection are caring, dialogue, scaffolding, other-regulation and self-regulation. Collaboration processes are used to examine how Ruth cooperated with other teachers in the team, the administration at the school, an external specialist and the pupils’ parents.

To understand Ruth’s facilitation of a good learning environment for all her students in the classroom, we selected episodes from video recordings at the listening-corner to illustrate what we felt were characteristic features of Ruth’s classroom. This is described in detail elsewhere (Flem, 2000); here we refer to one episode at the listening-corner, when new material in mathematics was introduced, in order to illustrate the learning processes in the classroom. Because Ruth was efficient in her dealings with Jon, we never observed any serious conflicts in the classroom.

**Results**

*Calculating the area of a parallelogram and a triangle*

Mathematics was scheduled for the morning assembly in the listening-corner and the topic was calculating the area of a parallelogram and a triangle. Before the bell sounded for the start of the first period, Ruth entered the classroom and drew a
parallelogram on the left-hand side of the blackboard, and placing dots to indicate the height on both sides of the parallelogram, so that the diagram appeared as a rectangle. Then she drew a triangle on the right side of the blackboard. The pupils arrived in class, and when they had gathered in the listening-corner, Ruth started by greeting them. On turning to the topic of the day, they first discussed the diagram on the left of the blackboard; then, in dialogue with the pupils, Ruth explained in a systematic way how to calculate the area of a parallelogram. As previously the pupils had calculated the area of squares and rectangles, Ruth repeated to her pupils how they had calculated the area of a rectangle, and asked them how they would find the area of a parallelogram. When the pupils had the formula: ‘The baseline times the height’, Ruth drew another parallelogram on the board, and again they reviewed how to calculate the area of this parallelogram. Ruth responded positively in her interactions and communication with the pupils.

Afterwards, Ruth told the pupils that they would now review calculating the area of the triangle, something that had been studied at the end of the previous school year. She pointed to the triangle on the board and explained how to compare a triangle with a rectangle. Without raising his hand, Jon said that he knew that the baseline should be multiplied by the height; he also knew that this must be divided by a number, but he did not know which number, and made a somewhat confusing proposal. In dialogue with Jon and another pupil, the conclusion was that ‘a triangle is one-half of a rectangle’. Ruth responded to this by saying, ‘Wonderful!’, and then produced dots from the original triangle which had been drawn on the blackboard, making a rectangle. Ruth drew two new triangles on the board, and in dialogue with the pupils, systematically reviewed the calculation of the area of triangles.

When reviewing triangles, the pupils were repeatedly encouraged to go to the blackboard and write their answer; Ruth also asked the pupils to explain what they were doing. Just before the pupils were to return to their regular seats, Ruth asked them again about the name of the diagram on the left, the parallelogram, for some of them had found it hard to remember and pronounce the word. Many pupils had raised their hands and were able to say the name ‘parallelogram’. After this, the pupils returned to their respective groups and started working on their assignments.

After break-time, the pupils started the next period, and again assembled in the listening-corner. Seeing that some of the pupils were a little tardy, Ruth started by telling them how important it was that they find their places in the listening-corner in time, and how they needed to work on this. Before starting English and geography, as scheduled, she said:

By the way, I received a very nice comment during the break. Somebody told me ‘it was so nice, because now mathematics really became clear to me’. I hope more of you feel like that. Once again: what is the name of the diagram? You really should be thinking about this each time I ask you, to see if more people join us each time. Now let’s count. Raise your hand all those of you who know (Ruth counts, arriving at 16). Sixteen of you know. Now I’ll ask again: what’s the name of this kind of diagram? (looks around to overview the pupils who raise their hands). Tor?

Tor said ‘a parallelogram’, and spoke clearly. Then Ruth asked the pupils how they found the area of a parallelogram. She looked around, and a girl answered: ‘The
baseline times the height’. Ruth replied enthusiastically, ‘Exactly!’ When she asked them how to find the area of a triangle, she looked around and asked Jon, who raised his hand and said: ‘Multiply the baseline by the height and divide by two’. Ruth nodded happily, saying ‘Bravo! Then we’ve got it’.

Ruth started the topic that was on the board. She explained to the pupils how they should go about doing their homework. She urged the pupils to support and help one another—for example, by phoning one another or lending books. They should also ask their parents for assistance if they needed additional information about the task they were working on. Ruth turned to English: irregular verbs in the past tense. This was difficult for Jon, who exclaimed, without raising his hand, that he could not get this right, and needed assistance. Ruth reminded him about raising his hand and following the established rules for the listening-corner.

We now provide an overview of what Ruth did in the classroom to facilitate a positive learning environment based on observations, video recordings and interviews. The theories mentioned in the theoretical framework will be used to interpret our main themes of cognitive learning processes, social learning processes and collaboration processes.

Cognitive learning processes

According to Bakhtin (1986), each utterance is a link in a communication chain, with meaning and understanding emerging from the dialogue and the interaction between the interlocutors. Understanding is not passively transmitted from sender to receiver. Whoever receives a message must also offer some sort of response, making it possible for new understanding to be created in a dialogic tension and confrontation. The observations and video recordings show that there was interaction between Ruth and her pupils at all times. In the listening-corner, the pupils took turns responding when she asked a question. Ruth also continually gave responses to the pupils’ utterances—for example, by repeating or elaborating on what the pupils said. She was highly focused on the idea that learning is not a passive transference of knowledge, and believed that there must always be an ongoing dialogue in any teaching situation: ‘The active pupil is very important in my learning system’. For instance, Jon began to understand how to calculate the area of a triangle, and many pupils remembered the name ‘parallelogram’ and how to calculate the area of a parallelogram and a triangle.

Utterances do not have only a thematic content; they also have an expressive element that encompasses the subjective and emotional aspects of the utterances, and in part determines understanding and the meaning of the utterance. The intonation of an utterance indicates how it can be interpreted and understood. Moreover, the expressiveness of the utterance is determined by the typical situation and the linguistic genre evoked. Ruth responded positively in her interactions and communication with the pupils when she enthusiastically said: ‘Wonderful!’ ‘Exactly!’ and ‘Bravo!’; she clearly showed respect for her pupils and what they said. This may thus have created a positive ambience that involves caring.
Like Bakhtin, Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of language, and considered language to be an instrument for the development of higher mental functions. According to Vygotsky, good teaching anticipates the development of the child, within the child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD). With the help and support of others, children are able to attain more than they could do on their own. Contemporary interpretations of Vygotskian theory use the concept of ‘scaffolding’ when referring to how children learn in the ZPD (Wood et al., 1976; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). What Ruth did in the classroom can be related to Tharp and Gallimore’s (1988) notion of ‘scaffolding’ to support and assist children’s learning in the ZPD. She emphasized the important points when they were learning how to calculate the areas of the diagrams they studied. She was a good model for her pupils, and she also had some pupils function as models for others. Ruth also used contingency management to assist her pupils by focusing on positive rewards, and she praised them when they mastered a task. She provided feedback by giving information on performances, and also assisted by means of instruction, linking instruction to questions and cognitive structuring.

According to Tharp and Gallimore, children may become aware of their own knowledge and how to proceed to solve a problem when they receive assistance. Ruth got the pupils to use the understanding they had, thus enabling them to reflect on the strategy or procedure they could use when solving a problem. For instance, she linked the parallelogram and triangle to the rectangle by using dots as invisible lines, so that the pupils would better understand how to calculate the areas of the diagrams. This can be linked to cognitive structuring.

Cognitive structuring is connected to the concept of metacognition, and how people can use knowledge of their cognition to monitor, control and regulate their cognitive processes. Development is from other-regulation to self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). A combination of other-regulation and self-regulation may also represent effective assistance when children learn and develop. However, Ruth was also well aware that reviewing new topics systematically in the listening-corner was not enough on its own: ‘The knowledge would die for them if they don’t turn around immediately and use it’. The pupils must thus be active and have the opportunity to develop self-regulation strategies. Development from other-regulation to self-regulation means that initially the teacher structures the activity, but gradually the child will assume more and more responsibility. Our observations reveal that Ruth ensured that the students were active agents in their learning, but those in need of support got it when appropriate. As the students’ understanding grew, she faded into the background.

Because the three children with special needs constituted her biggest challenge, Ruth was very concerned that they needed assistance and support to achieve a positive academic outcome. Janne had severe learning difficulties and therefore needed an adapted learning programme. This was provided in a flexible manner, the pupil was listened to and included in this process. The learning programme established for Janne appears to be functioning well; and Jens has also shown good progress over the last few years. They have also a flexible adapted-learning scheme for Jens: he can take part in the decision on whether he will work in or outside the classroom.
Ruth was satisfied with how Janne and Jens were developing academically. Jon’s academic achievements were varied, but he was aware of his learning problems and wanted to improve himself. Ruth was concerned to bolster his self-confidence in a way that would lead to a positive outcome both academically and socially. As Jon was the pupil having the greatest behavioural problems, we especially look at how Ruth facilitated a positive social development for him.

Social learning processes

As mentioned above, there were clear rules and procedures for how the pupils should behave both in the listening-corner and when they were working in groups. Jon had, for instance, difficulties following the rules for taking part in conversations in the listening-corner. He often forgot to raise his hand when he wanted to speak. However, the difficulties in remembering the rules in the listening-corner do not constitute the greatest challenge. Jon had social problems that manifested themselves in different ways. As a consequence, the children in the class found it difficult to work with him but, at the same time, did not want to reject him. Ruth said: ‘He’s not really lonely at school. But he burns his bridges with people quite quickly and therefore has no close relations’. Jon had much to learn if he was to master social situations.

Children should not only learn to control and regulate their own thinking activities in order to develop academically, but have to learn to control and regulate their behaviour, so that they are able to master complex social situations (Vygotsky, 1978; Díaz et al., 1990). Learning in the primary school classroom of today is often inherently a social activity where children frequently work together, and this consequently places demands on social skills. When growing up, children are initially controlled and directed by adults, but gradually they are expected to assume more responsibility themselves. Ruth knew that Jon needed limits and clear rules. An agreement has been made with him that in the event there is too much unrest and disruption, he should leave the room with an assistant or a teacher to continue to work in another room. This has been accepted by Jon.

The dialogue between Ruth and Jon revealed that they were on good terms and their relationship based on openness and caring. New meaning and understanding emerge in the dialogue and interplay between interlocutors, and in a dialogic interaction mutual caring is essential (Bakhtin, 1986): if Jon is to learn how to control his behaviour, he has to understand and accept that he has a problem, and be willing to do something about it. Ruth was keenly focused on what could be done to help Jon gain a better understanding of his social problems. One aspect that she repeatedly emphasized was that Jon needed to develop empathy and the ability to see the perspectives of others. However, this was difficult: ‘He isn’t capable of seeing things from someone else’s perspective. It’s the same with empathy’. To develop Jon’s understanding of his social problems, Ruth regularly confronted him with unfortunate episodes he had been involved in. She repeatedly initiated a dialogue between him and the children he had upset. This, however, was not easy; Ruth realized that conflicts that flared up between Jon and other children were bad for all of them. She
nevertheless felt it important to be open about the conflicts, that everyone was
allowed to raise difficult issues and discuss why things went wrong.

It is easy for children who lack social skills to fall victim to a vicious circle of being
in constant conflict with their surroundings. Such conflicts only reinforce negative
behaviour, generating negative experiences that fuel the cycle. Ruth realized that Jon
had many positive qualities that she wished him to develop. As previously mentioned,
Jon was motivated to do well in school. Ruth believed that mastering school work may
lead to improvement in his self-confidence and help to stop the downward spiral of
negative experiences. But not least, she realized that mastering social challenges
would impact on his self-confidence. We observed that Ruth was a good model for
how the pupils should behave. Ruth also responded to what Jon said or did. Similarly,
she gently instructed him to follow the rules, for she did not pick on him every time,
but reminded him that there were established rules to be adhered to. According to
Tharp and Gallimore (1988), the instructing teacher voice may eventually become
the child’s own inner voice. It is part of the development from other-regulation to self-
regulation, when the voice of the regulating other has been transformed into thought.
Ruth also assisted by means of contingency management. As mentioned above, Jon
knew he must accept the consequences of his restlessness and leave the classroom if
constant and major problems occurred. However, Ruth focused on giving him praise
and encouragement because this helped to create a positive atmosphere. She also
mentioned that Jon was being trained to think strategically and structure his day,
allowing him to master daily life. This is cognitive structuring, with a social dimension.
In spite of all her efforts, Ruth was not quite satisfied with Jon’s social development
and felt she had no other option but to continue with the same strategies she was
already using.

**Collaboration processes**

Facilitating for a good learning environment for all the pupils in a class is a challeng-
ing process. The class teacher therefore needs to cooperate with and be supported by
other persons. The cooperation processes are often started in conjunction with other
colleagues at the school, and from there we find new lines of cooperation to the
parents/guardians and others in service functions outside school. Ruth points to the
importance of this type of cooperation with other persons involved in the activities
with pupils in school, particularly when it comes to children with special needs.

**Cooperation with teachers.** Because the school we joined was an open school, with two
parallel classes occupying the same area, all the teachers worked as a team. The two
class teachers cooperated very well with the special education teacher and the support
teacher. All of them took responsibility for the pupils, and often discussed what was
going on in the two classes. This teamwork was good because they had so many things
in common, and their basic beliefs and the way they regarded pupils were very similar.
This cooperation benefited too from the ways in which they in fact differed and thus
complemented or supplemented each other. They were good at giving each other positive feedback; Ruth pointed out that ‘we are open about what is going on’.

In their triadic model, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) point to the importance of creating a common basis for the work in school and of taking support and assistance very seriously. According to Tharp and Gallimore, the entire school system represents a chain of many levels, or positions. These positions have an influence one upon the other, and in an efficient school system are important in facilitating a good learning environment in the classroom. In an analysis of the school system it may be sufficient to consider three positions that follow one upon the other in the chain, hence the designation of the triadic model. The rationale underlying the triadic model is that the links that follow upon each other in the chain have the best contact and thus the greatest mutual influence. Generally, work performed well at one stage assists the next, enabling it, in turn, to assist the subsequent stage. In this way, the class teacher may gain inspiration, raise his/her competence and thus gain that extra impulse that is needed to facilitate a good learning environment in class. Ruth was very focused on this aspect, and made it clear that, with the challenges facing her in the classroom, she would have been unable to cope without support from others.

Administration cooperation. Ruth had positive experiences when it came to cooperation with the school’s administration. She emphasized that she had good dialogue with the administration, which did not appear to represent the ‘authoritative discourse’ (Bakhtin, 1986). To enter into a dialogic interaction, mutual feelings of trust and respect among dialogue partners is important, and this appeared to be present in communication between Ruth and the school administration. Ruth also mentioned that the administration had ‘good contact with the pupils’, and the fact that she received the support of the school administrators also benefited the pupils.

Cooperation with external specialist. As mentioned above, Jon appeared to present the greatest challenge in the class. Due to the problems that arose in his interplay with other pupils and teachers, the psychiatrist who specialized in those children with severe behavioural problems had regular meetings with Ruth. In addition to the special education and support teachers, the school’s administrators and Jon’s parents were also involved in these meetings. Ruth felt that she had received support from the specialist through being heard, and received confirmation that they were ‘thinking and acting correctly’ in their approach to Jon.

Parental cooperation. Ruth offered a positive description of her cooperation with the parents of the three children with special needs, and underlined the importance of good contact with them. She was particularly happy that the cooperation with Jon’s parents was functioning well, essential to Jon’s development: ‘So I was really happy that, right from the start, I felt that I had good contact with the parents’. Ruth felt it was vital that Jon’s parents also attended the meetings with the specialist. Even if she expressed understanding of how hard it may be for Jon’s parents to be confronted
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with all the episodes, she believed openness to be important and that they should be informed about what was going on. The parents also offered their reactions and reflections, and were listened to.

Parents as those with the main responsibility for their child also know their child best. Cooperation between teachers and parents is thus an important part of supporting the child in its development. Cooperation with the family may also form one stage in Tharp and Gallimore’s (1988) triadic model. When the teacher gives assistance to the parents, they may in turn support the pupil and promote the pupil’s development. The triadic model also demonstrates that influence does not only flow one way, but that the stages may mutually influence one another. The teacher is not the only person to provide assistance. The pupil’s parents may also influence and motivate the teacher, so that the pupil will receive even better support and assistance in school. Needless to say, in such cases the parents and the teachers must have established a good dialogue with one another. This is a condition that appears to have been met in this study.

Discussion

What teachers do to facilitate a good learning environment and adaptive education for everyone is critical if inclusive education is to succeed. In this study, we found that Ruth created a positive atmosphere in the classroom and also had good academic insight. Clark et al. (1997) examined typical traits of schools that were interested in innovation and the renewal of special education practices. For instance, what was typical of these schools was that the teachers were interested in giving differentiated and appropriate education for all the pupils in the school. In their reflections on the inclusive school, Meijer and Stevens (1997) claim that teachers are key persons in facilitating adaptive education and determine the quality of the classroom environment: the ‘objective of integration’ could thus easily be replaced by ‘the objective of developing good education’ (p. 125). The importance of facilitating factors at the classroom level was also frequently underlined in Flem and Keller’s (2000) study of inclusive schools. Furthermore, it is important that the special needs resources are used in a flexible way, and that the roles of class teacher and special education teacher may change (Clark et al., 1997; Meijer et al., 1997; Flem & Keller, 2000). Ruth had also positive cooperation with the parents, an important facilitating factor in achieving an inclusive education (Flem & Keller, 2000).

Teaching in a school practising inclusive education, teachers will encounter different challenges and new opportunities. The class teacher has the main responsibility for facilitating differentiated education in the class. To deal with the diversity among children in the schools of today, teacher education and systematic teacher development are critical, and it is therefore likely that teacher education is one of the first steps in the achievement of inclusive education (Meijer et al., 1997); the importance of basic teacher education is also emphasized in Flem and Keller’s (2000) study.

However, a number of informants were concerned that teacher education was inadequate. A fundamental rethinking of school development and teacher education is
called for because student teachers have limited insight into how to work with the
diverse student population (Haug, 1996). Thus general pedagogy must be strength-
ened in teacher education and special education must become an integral part of it.
It is time, then, that teacher education caught up with the realities in the schools.

Needless to say, in a school aiming to meet the needs of all children, teachers need to
receive a variety of support and specialist assistance. In her school, Ruth had good
collaboration with the school administrators, the other teachers in the team, and also
an external specialist. She felt that she received support from the specialist through
being listened to, and was able to confirm that the team was thinking and acting
correctly in their approach to Jon. Having the opportunity to discuss and reflect on
their practice enables staff development (Clark et al., 1997). Here the teamwork
opened the door to new challenges and solving problems at the classroom level, as
opposed to previous practice that had consisted in isolating the ‘problem child’ phys-
ically, emotionally and socially.

Traditionally, special education has emphasized that special needs arise from ‘defi-
cits’ in the individual. We have a new holistic approach to special education and an
alternative would be to develop the resources that exist both with respect to the pupils
and the school. By facilitating versatile and positive learning experiences, and avoid-
ing the emphasis on ‘deficits’, new positive learning will result. Mastery is frequently
the foundation of further learning. One factor repeatedly emphasized by Ruth was the
importance of reinforcing positive qualities in all the children. For example, she
reinforced the positive aspects of Jon’s conduct and attempted to create a caring rela-
tionship with him. She was focused on supporting Jon in order to enable him to
succeed academically and to obtain positive experiences from his interaction with
other children.

Concluding remarks

The fact that great variety is found in inclusive schools should be considered a positive
element rather than as a problem. Variation is valuable and interesting: Befring
(1997) has referred to this as the ‘enrichment perspective’. In his vision of and reflec-
tions on the inclusive school, Wedell (1995) emphasized the starting-point as the
acceptance that all children are different. The basic aim of inclusive schooling is to
consider the learning needs of all the children; differences must not be hidden or
denied, rather they should be brought into the open and made visible. In a school
striving to embrace the diversity and differences of its pupils’ learning needs, children
with special needs will be a natural part of that diversity. If the school system is orga-
nized to embrace such diversity, children and young people with special needs will not
be singled out or stigmatized.

The ideology of a ‘school for all’ implies the inclusion of all the pupils in a social,
academic and cultural community. It is not sufficient to place a pupil in his or her
neighbourhood school and then assume that their needs will automatically be met. In
all probability, the road to satisfactory solutions with respect to care, learning and
quality of life is long and challenging. The first step is to utilize the great resources
found in successful local solutions to the problem of inclusive practice by studying, describing and analysing them, and sharing what has been experienced and learned with teachers and teacher educators. Each solution is tailored to a local situation, but there are always lessons to be learned beyond this. These studies help us to visualize what is possible; they function as a tool for reflecting on our own practice. It is important that researchers continue to address how positive academic and social outcomes for all students in the classroom may be achieved, and thus how schools can develop more inclusive practices.

Note

1. Percentages of recorded SEN students of total student populations in compulsory education in Norway was 6.5% in 1996, and percentages of SEN students in mainstream classes was 6.0%. Students in segregated school provisions as percentages of total student populations in compulsory education was thus 0.5% (Vislie, 2003); the numbers have remained relatively stable.

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