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ABSTRACT

This epilogue to the special issue entitled ‘The Nordic experience of inclusive and special education’ reflects on the eight articles included in the special issue. The analysis is centred around two specific questions 1) can distinctive Nordic conceptualisations of inclusive and special education be identified? 2) what insights can be gained from this special issue for research and practice in the field of inclusive and special education beyond the Nordic community? The findings indicate a degree of consistency across the Nordic countries, yet also highlight significant variations at the national, regional, and local levels, which contrasts with the perception of a distinctive Nordic model of inclusive and special education. The greatest commonality is that all Nordic countries (like other European countries) are striving to advance inclusive education and still have a lengthy journey ahead of them in reducing educational inequalities. However, the definition of special educational needs, the implementation of inclusive and special education, and the professionalisation of teachers, could not be characterised by a universal, uniform Nordic approach.

30 years after the Salamanca statement – the ongoing fuzziness of ‘inclusive education’

In 1994, the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1994) was introduced, emphasising the importance of inclusive education. Subsequently, a number of additional policy documents have been published, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) and the Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015). These policy documents serve to further promote the principles set forth in the Salamanca Statement, not only within the Nordic region but rather on a global scale. These developments illustrate a broader commitment to inclusive education and the enduring relevance of the Salamanca Statement in shaping educational policies and practices worldwide.

Nevertheless, a significant shift has occurred in the discourse, with the current focus being on learning barriers affecting all learners, rather than solely those with special educational needs (SEN; in this context see e.g. Ainscow 2016; Schwab 2021). The theoretical discussion has shifted from a question of placement (integration) to school

development. This is exemplified by the assertion that schools should be developed as places ‘where all students naturally belong’ (Uthus and Qvortrup 2024, 2). Nevertheless, while the European commitment to inclusive education was endorsed within these frameworks, the precise meaning of inclusive education remains unclear, particularly regarding its practical implementation. One issue in this regard is that empirical studies and school practice continue to focus on students with SEN, while policy documents promote conceptualisations of inclusive education that consider ‘all students’.

Uniqueness of the Nordic conceptions of inclusive and special education

It is challenging to identify the distinctive features of the Nordic approaches to inclusive and special education. This is because there is no universally accepted understanding of inclusive education (see e.g. Olsen and Hanssen 2024; Udd 2024) or SEN (e.g. Olsen and Hanssen 2024) within these countries. The significant discrepancy in the prevalence of students with SEN across different Nordic countries (see e.g. Cameron et al. 2024) provides compelling evidence that the concept of SEN is not a reliable and valid category within the Nordic context. In line with results of the scoping review of Keles, ten Braak, and Munthe (2022, 431) ‘there still is a need to clarify perspectives on inclusion and on who needs support’ within Nordic countries.

Similarly, this is not the case in other European countries (Schwab 2021). This is consistent with the extensive variation in the descriptions of special needs education in major education legislation within the Nordic countries (Cameron et al. 2024). A common feature of the education systems of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden is the increase in students with SEN over the past few decades (Cameron et al. 2024; Taneja-Johansson and Powell 2024).

Regarding the implementation of inclusive and special education in the Nordic countries, the Nordic model applies to the model of ‘one school for all students’. However, it appears that the Nordic countries are not achieving the desired outcome in terms of reducing the number of students attending special schools. Even within the mainstream educational setting, there are indications of hidden mechanisms of exclusion, whereby students may be officially enrolled in mainstream classes but still spend a significant proportion of their school time in pull-out rooms. As demonstrated by Spangsberg and Ydesen (2024), mainstream teachers may not perceive themselves as responsible for students who are removed from the classrooms for extended periods of time. Conversely, the study of Sirkko, Kotilainen and Takala (2024) indicates that special education teachers may not be held accountable for all students but rather for those having special needs. Furthermore, it is evident that there have been political and practical developments in Sweden that are contrary to the principles of inclusion (Taneja-Johansson and Powell 2024; Udd 2024). In the study by Spangsberg and Ydesen (2024), it became evident that even teachers in Denmark were perpetuating segregation.

Moreover, resources appear to constitute a significant obstacle to the implementation of inclusion in the Nordic countries (e.g. Mjøs and Moen 2024; Spangsberg and Ydesen 2024; Udd 2024). Overall, the implementation of inclusive practices varies considerably at all levels, including the national, regional, and local levels (e.g. Cameron et al. 2024; Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2024; Mjøs and Moen 2024; Udd 2024). It is worthy of note that the extensive provision of multi-tiered systems of support, which are a common feature of

all Nordic countries, albeit in various forms, represents a distinctive aspect. With regard to the multi-tiered systems, it can be stated that they result in a singling out of individual students for specific forms of support or adaptation. This is somewhat at odds with the concept of inclusion, which is concerned with the provision of support for all students.

It appears that the Nordic countries are collectively dedicated to reducing educational disparities and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education. Furthermore, early intervention is regarded as a more favourable approach than segregation when dealing with students with SEN. Although policy documents (such as the Agenda 2030) espouse an inclusive approach for all students, Nordic practice (similar to those of other European countries) continues to rely on labelling processes, creating a resource labelling dilemma (allocation of resources for students with SEN are based on formal labels; in this context see also Taneja-Johansson and Powell 2024). However, it is important to note that SEN should not be defined as a conglomeration of variables pertaining to a student. Rather, it should be linked with learning barriers encountered within the school environment (in this context see also Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2024). The recently enacted Norwegian Education Act may serve as a promising model, as it does not explicitly mention SEN per se (Olsen and Hanssen 2024). In this context, it is also pertinent to consider whether a student has a disability or whether a pupil becomes disabled by not fitting into the environment.

When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.
(Alexander Den Heijer)

A review of the literature on teacher training in the Nordic countries reveals a lack of consensus in the nature of a 'Nordic way' of professionalising the teaching of inclusive and special education (see e.g. Cameron et al. 2024). Instead, the evidence suggests that a variety of qualification strategies are in place. Within the special issue, there is a dearth of clarity regarding the competencies that are required for inclusive or special education or 'inclusive special education' (see Sirkko, Kotilainen and Takala 2024). It is a pertinent question why teachers who have undergone training for SEN are more likely to be employed in segregated settings (e.g. special schools, small groups) than in inclusive settings (e.g. team-teaching like in the case of Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2024), given that Nordic countries are committed to inclusion. The results presented by Sirkko, Kotilainen and Takala (2024) indicate that special educators perceive collaboration as a pivotal aspect of their work. However, the prevailing practice of special education in segregated settings represents a significant obstacle to this collaboration. Udd (2024) observed that Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Sweden face challenges in defining their roles within the school staff. This issue could be addressed through the support of the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (like in Norway, see Mjøs and Moen 2024), which could facilitate the development of professional learning communities. Additionally, the role of principals (see e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2024) in shaping school inclusiveness requires greater attention.

Lessons taken

A key issue that arises in this special issue is how to translate the broad theoretical understanding of inclusion, which encompasses all students, into high-quality practice

without neglecting the specific needs of students. The included papers focused nearly on students with SEN within the context of inclusive education. This is a significant shortcoming, as it gives rise to the erroneous notion that students with SEN constitute a monolithic entity defined by a singular diagnosis and predicated upon assumptions of normality and ability. The question thus arises as to whether there is a clear boundary where SEN begin and end. Conversely, this approach fails to acknowledge other learning barriers, such as those related to language proficiency or their intersectionality. For instance, the education of refugee students is not a prominent focus within the special issue. This is a significant issue, as evidenced by the findings of Taneja-Johansson and Powell (2024), who highlighted the disproportionate representation of students with migration biographies in special education classrooms.

Nevertheless, it seems to be a challenging dilemma to pursue inclusive education without special education, as this could potentially result in the inadvertent neglect of students with SEN. Therefore, it needs to be acknowledged that inclusive education should not risk losing specific knowledge in the field of special education. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether it is possible to achieve an 'all students' approach through the lens of special education. Despite Sirkko, Kotilainen and Takala's (2024) discussion of 'inclusive special education', the field remains uncertain about the distinction between high-quality education and inclusive education. Moreover, if we are to proceed, it would be prudent to consider preparing future teachers to collaborate from the outset of their training (in this context see e.g. Hellmich et al. 2021). This may assist in overcoming divisions regarding the responsibilities of teachers with diverse specialisations.

One notable deficiency within the special issue is the absence of student voices, which could have provided valuable insights from a key stakeholder group. It would have been beneficial to include the perspectives of those who are the intended beneficiaries of the Nordic conceptions, whether they exist in practice or not. Doing so would have made this special issue a more participatory one.

Conclusion

The papers included in the special issue challenge the notion of a 'perfect' Nordic model of inclusive education. In general, the Nordic countries, like other European countries, have different conceptualisations of inclusive education (Schwab 2021). Such distinctions are not merely confined to the national level; they also manifest at the regional, school district, school, class, teacher, and student levels. This lack of consensus on the definition of inclusive practice may result in the emergence of several mechanisms of hidden exclusion, which could ultimately lead to unequal educational opportunities. Conversely, this lack of consensus may afford countries, regions, school districts, schools and teachers the autonomy and flexibility to take several conditions (e.g. environmental conditions, specific individual students' requirements) into account.

It is evident that a significant discrepancy exists between the tenets espoused in policy documents and the actual practice of inclusion. It is currently unclear whether the strategy of 'inclusion through exclusion' (e.g. part time special education as a tool to promote inclusion) represents the optimal approach or whether the goal of full inclusion may ultimately result in a situation akin to 'exclusion through inclusion'. In light of the overarching objective of ensuring access to

education for all, it is pertinent to question the continued existence of special schools catering to students with SEN. From a normative perspective, which encompasses ethical and moral considerations, it is pertinent to question the legitimacy of segregated education and whether it does not, in fact, merely exemplify institutional discrimination. From an empirical standpoint, there is a dearth of evidence substantiating the efficacy of exclusionary practices. Conversely, empirical evidence tends to support the efficacy of inclusive education. The final dimension to be considered is that of feasibility. However, this is frequently addressed from the perspective of teachers, as evidenced by this special issue, with minimal attention paid to the students themselves. For instance, is it truly feasible for students (with SEN) to attend a special school located a considerable distance from their place of residence, rather than having the option of schooling in the vicinity of their home (see Ebenbeck et al. 2024)? Perhaps it would be beneficial to consider how the quality of education could be enhanced if there were no special schools, rather than focusing on the factors that impede or facilitate inclusive education.

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