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From the idea of inclusion into practice in the Nordic countries: a qualitative literature review

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative literature review includes 34 articles published in English-language, peer-reviewed journals to obtain a Nordic perspective on the status of the research on how the idea of inclusion implemented into practice is reflected in the literature from 2009 through 2019. Qualitative content analysis was conducted. In the analysis, we identified the characteristics of the studies, how inclusion and inclusive education were defined, and which themes concerning the idea of inclusion into practice that emerged from the review. Articles from five Nordic countries were found, Sweden with most of the publications. Almost twice as many of the sampled articles used qualitative methods as quantitative. Inclusion and inclusive education were seldom defined explicit, and the different way of understanding inclusion that emerges was human rights and democratic principles, placement of SEN-students, participation and belongingness, and high-quality learning for all students. Three themes was highlighted in the transformation of the idea into practice: Placement and the organisation of schooling, Teachers' beliefs and attitudes, and Students' and parents' experiences. This literature review shows that few research studies have focused specific on how to transform the idea of inclusion into practice.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; inclusive education; inclusive practices; Nordic countries; special educational needs; literature review; qualitative content analysis

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, inclusion has become a dominant concept in policy and practice within the field of special educational needs across the world, reflected in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO 1994). That statement argued that an inclusive orientation is 'the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all' (p. ix). Thus, meeting the demand for inclusive education is essential for ensuring human rights, equity, and social justice and for winning the fight for a non-segregated society, which is why these values and notions form the hub of inclusive educational policy and practice (Barton and Armstrong 2007). How far different countries have come in developing inclusive education varies, from countries where no students go to school at all to other countries where all students have a juridical right to education (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019). Succeeding in transforming the idea of

inclusion into practice in school is related to the understanding of the relation between the concept and idea of inclusion and the teacher's activity of inclusive education in the schools.

Many studies and reviews about inclusion and inclusive education have been conducted in recent years, showing that there are different ways to conceptualise and understand inclusion as well as various approaches to promoting inclusive education (Artiles et al. 2006; Nilholm and Göransson 2017; Amor et al. 2019). Some scholars consider inclusion to have replaced integration, which means inclusion is only a matter of placement, i.e. SEN (special educational needs) students are physically placed in the classroom (Norwich 2008; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Other researchers argue that inclusion is not only about physical placement (see, for example, Thomazet 2009) but that inclusive education could also be seen as replacing the concept of special education (Nilholm and Göransson 2017). In yet another review by Messiou (2017), the results show that mainly theoretical and descriptive research has been conducted regarding inclusion, and there is a lack of empirical research on interventions.

In an analysis of research concerning inclusive education by Göransson and Nilholm (2014), four different theoretical approaches of inclusive education were found. Two definitions focused on the inclusion of *all* students: 1) inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all individual students and 2) inclusion as building communities in schools and classrooms. The two remaining definitions focused on the inclusion of *SEN students*: 1) inclusion as the placement of SEN students in mainstream classrooms and 2) inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of individual SEN students. The authors concluded that the various definitions of inclusive education might depend on different perspectives on schools' missions and what schools should accomplish.

In a Norwegian study (Nilsen 2020), inclusion was divided in a similar way but into three dimensions: 1) an organisational dimension, which is a matter of physical placement and the organisation of schooling; 2) a social dimension, which refers to the students' experiences of belonging, involvement and participation in work and activities in the classroom and to good relationships in terms of both student–student relations and student–teacher relations; and finally, 3) an academic dimension, which concerns learning outcomes, methods of teaching and learning, the extent to which students work together on something, whether students share certain common academic content, and whether students work on common tasks, use common working methods or common forms of activity.

These theoretical approaches to inclusion are closely connected to inclusive education not only as a matter of placement but also as the teaching of a diverse group of students, as far as possible, in one classroom that is organised to meet the needs of all students (Isaksson and Lindqvist 2015). A similar view is presented by Haug (2020, 304), who emphasises that inclusion and inclusive education are 'about the organisation of teaching, about teacher and pupil activities, about pupils' experiences and about their benefit from the teaching'. Thus, having teachers work together to ensure that all students feel valued and obtain the support they need to help them develop their talents and achieve their goals is central to developing an inclusive education (Kurth and Gross 2014; Haug 2020; Vislie 2003).

The Nordic countries have long been recognised as providing an inclusive and egalitarian educational system, with ‘one school for all’ being a famous catchphrase. However, some reports have shown that there is often a gap between policy and ideals on the one hand and the realisation of the idea of inclusion in practice on the other (*Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen, and Skogen 2019; Haug 2017; Hjørne 2016; Jahnukainen 2015; Nilsen 2017). This indicates the lack of research on inclusive practices, i.e. on how to implement the idea of inclusion into practice. For this reason, this review of research addresses this lack by reviewing the research on the vision of inclusion and consequences for practices. The main focus is to map whether there is research in the Nordic countries that specifically deals with the issue of how to transform the idea of inclusion into practice, that specifically involve students with special educational needs. More specifically, the purpose was to report on the findings of a literature review of peer-reviewed articles published in the English language over ten years (2009–2019). However, an analysis of the research on the idea of inclusion into practice within the available sample requires an analysis of the understanding that underlies the relevant research with regard to the phenomenon of inclusion. Thus, the analysis entails an analysis of interpretations of inclusion within the current sample as well.

The research questions guiding the review were as follows: 1: *What characterises the research methods in the articles?* 2: *How are inclusion and inclusive education defined in the articles?* 3: *What themes regarding the transformation from the idea of inclusion into practice emerged in the review?*

Materials and methods

In this section, we report the procedures used in this qualitative literature review of peer-reviewed articles on the Nordic countries. The search for articles was limited to research articles in the Zotero Web database, which provides access to many resources and databases through bibsys-almaprimo.com (for example, Social Science Premium Collection, ERIC, SWEPUB and more). The words used in the search for articles were ‘Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education and Inclusive Practices’ and ‘Norway or Sweden or Denmark or Finland or Nordic or Scandinavian’. The inclusion criteria involved whether the scientific articles 1) focused on the Nordic countries, 2) appeared in a peer-reviewed journal in the English language during the period 2009–2019, 3) involved a student population with special educational needs in comprehensive schools, and if the articles 4) had a focus on inclusive education and/or inclusive practices. Only empirical articles offering evidence from quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method designs were considered. This excluded review articles and document analysis. Figure 1 shows the procedure in the literature search.

The first search included 148 articles. After a full text screening, 123 articles were removed, because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. This left 25 articles that were eligible for inclusion in the literature review. Then, after a manual second additional search, based on the same four inclusion criteria, nine articles were included, a total of 34 articles were considered eligible for our review. The literature search was executed in end of December 2019.

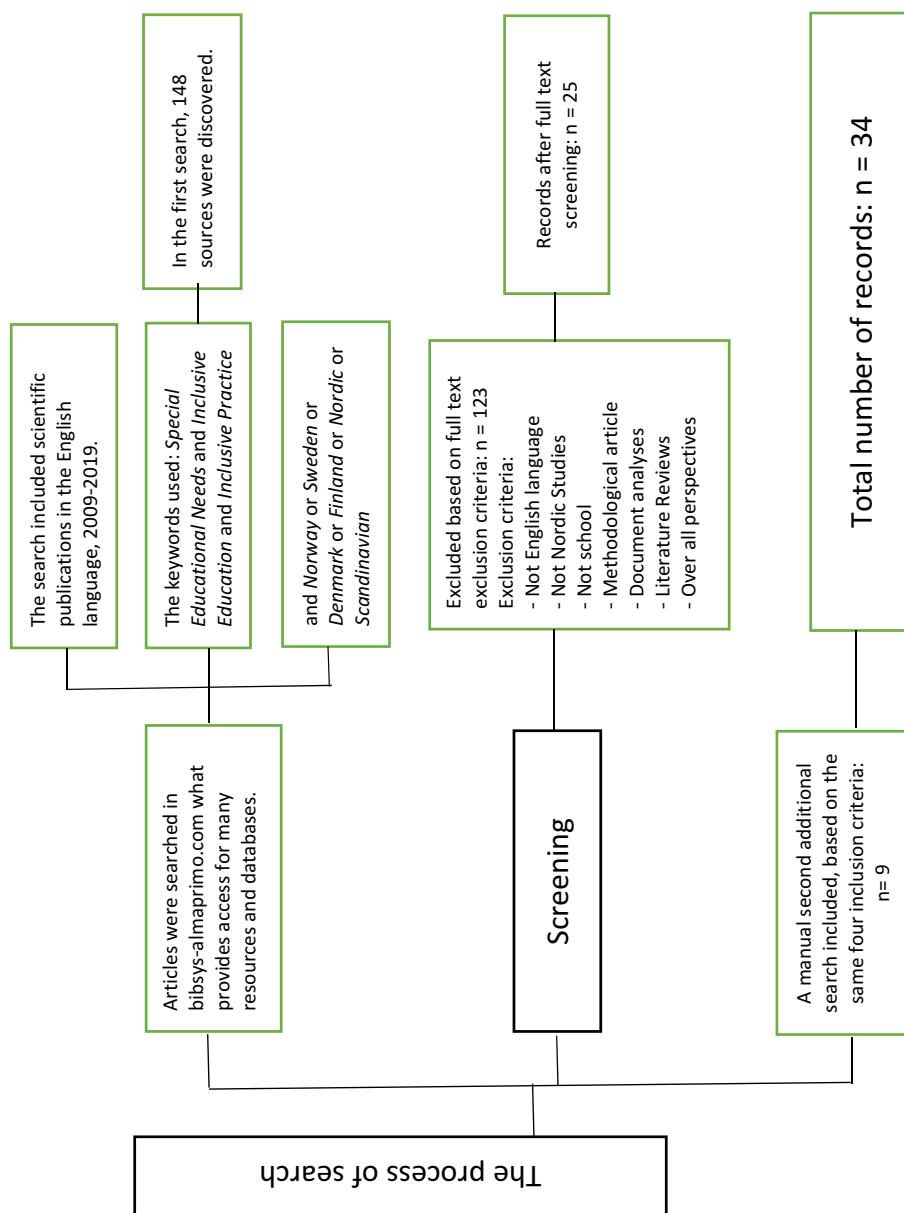


Figure 1. The literature search procedure.

The 34 articles that met the inclusion criteria for our literature review were then systematically analysed based on following coding developed for the purpose of the study: Country of origin; Focus; Perspective of Inclusive Practice; Research method, Research design and Analysis method; Participants; Perspectives of inclusion (organisational, social, academic); and Key findings.

In the next step, qualitative content analyses (Schreier 2012; Domas and Marsh 2006) were conducted to identify articles reporting on inclusive practices that specifically involved students with special educational needs in the Nordic countries. These analyses implied that we were looking closely at the latent meanings and patterns in the text based on our open research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). To analyse and report the patterns and deeper structures related to inclusive practices within the complex data and materials in the articles, we considered the combination of what knowledge emerges from the articles and how the articles represent already existing knowledge (Schreier 2012).

To address our first research question: *'What characterizes the research methods in the articles?'*, we have systematised each article based on qualitative or quantitative methods sample, year periods and country of origin. For the second research question: *'How are inclusion and inclusive education defined in the articles?'*, as well as the third question: *'What themes regarding the transformation from the idea of inclusion into practice emerged in the review?'*, we used qualitative content analysis to identify the meanings of and patterns in the concepts of inclusion and inclusive education.

Results

In the following section, we summarise the findings of our review. References marked with an asterisk * indicate studies included in our literature review. In the first part, we present the characteristics of the research methods on inclusive practices in the Nordic countries. The second and third parts of this result section constitute the findings of the theoretical analysis of the included articles in this literature review. In the second part, we analyse the different definitions of and approaches to inclusive practices. Finally, in the third part, the themes emerging from the analysis of the articles are presented.

Part 1: The characteristics of the research articles on inclusive practices

Answering the first research question regarding the characteristics of the articles, we identified the research methods and design, the sample and country of origin in the articles.

Research methods used

The studies in the 34 articles reviewed include both qualitative and quantitative approaches as well as mix methods. We split the methods and the number of methods into two different periods, from 2009 to 2014 and from 2015 to 2019 (Table 1).

There were almost equally as many articles published from 2009 to 2014 (16) as from 2015 to 2019 (18). In the period between 2009 and 2014, there were fewer qualitative studies (8) than in 2015–2019 (12), and there were more quantitative studies in 2009–2014

Table 1. Overview of studies by year and method. Numbers indicate the number of studies.

Research Method	Year	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed method	Total
	2009–2014	8	7	1	16
	2015–2019	12	5	1	18
Total		20	12	2	34

(12) than in 2014–2019 (5). However, during the whole period from 2009 to 2019, twice as many (20) of the studies used qualitative methods as used quantitative methods (12), and only two used mixed methods.

Research methods and countries involved

Articles from five Nordic countries were found (Table 2).

Sweden published most of the articles (14), two involved other countries. The methods used varied between quantitative methods (7), qualitative methods (6) and mixed method (1). Finland had the second highest number of published articles (11), four in collaboration with other countries, and there was almost the same amount of qualitative (6) than quantitative (5) methods used. Norway had the third most articles (6), one in collaboration with another Nordic country (Sweden). Four of those articles used qualitative methods, one used quantitative method, and one used a mixed method. Denmark had few articles (2), one in collaboration with another country outside the Nordic countries. In each of them, qualitative methods were used. Iceland had also two articles, both qualitative, one of which was in collaboration with another country outside the Nordic countries. Of the 34 articles, nine involved other countries, and only one of these involved another Nordic country (Sweden and Norway).

Research design and type of study

All the articles with quantitative approaches used a questionnaire (12), and some of these measured teachers' attitudes (3) towards inclusion (Table 3).

In two articles, mixed methods were used, with teachers and students as the informants.

The qualitative designs used included interviews (15), multiple qualitative methods with a combination of observations, interviews and/or document analyses to gather the data (5). The topics of most of the articles with qualitative designs were teachers', parents' and students' experiences of practice, the conditions for implementing policy in practice, and the use of different methodologies as inclusive practices in the classroom.

Table 2. Overview of studies by nation and method. Numbers indicate the number of studies.

Nation	N	Other countries involved	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed method
Sweden	14*	2*	7	6	1
Finland	11	4	5	6	-
Norway	6*	1	1	4	1
Denmark	2	1	-	2	-
Iceland	2	1	-	2	-
Total	35	9	13	27	2

*One of the studies Norway and Sweden collaborate therefore the total number of studies connected to the different countries are 35, but the total studies are 34.

Table 3. Overview of the research designs, information, and informants. Numbers indicate the number of studies.

Research design	Total number	Information	Informants		Informants		Informants		Informants		Ed. psych. / Supervisors
	Type of design	Documents	Teachers/Spec. teachers	Students	Parents	Policy makers/School admin./Headmasters	Informants	Informants	Informants	Informants	
Questionnaires	12		10		1		1				
*Interviews	15		10	4	1		3			3	
**Multiple Qualitative Methods	5	2	3	3	1		1			1	
Mixed method	2		2	2							
Qualitative/Quantitative											
Total	34	2	25	9	3		5			4	

*Different informant in some of the studies

**The variety of multiple methods was fieldwork with observations, and a combination of interview, observations, and documents.

The information and informants used in the data collection came from different sources. Two of the articles using multiple qualitative methods included documents as one of several sources. The informants in the articles using questionnaires, interviews, multiple qualitative methods, or mixed methods, were mainly teachers (25). Other informant groups included students and/or parents and other actors in the school and special education sector, such as school leaders, school administrators, politicians, supervisors, and educational psychologists. Policy makers, school administrators and headmasters participated as informants in four articles, and educational psychologists and supervisors participated in two articles. However, in a few studies, students (9) and parents (5) were the informants.

Part 2: How inclusion and inclusive education are defined

The results show how the focus of the definitions in the 34 articles differed theoretically, and most of the articles did not explicitly state their definitions but explained them indirectly. Following four different understandings emerged in the theoretical content analysis: *Human rights and democratic principles*, *Placement of SEN-students*, *Participation and belongingness* and *High-quality learning for all students*.

Human rights and democratic principles appeared in terms of values, human rights, democratic principles, and social justice, for instance, as the democratic values of equality and the acceptance of diversity and the democratic principles of participation for all (*Cameron and Lindqvist 2014*, 670–671; *Engevik, Næss, and Berntsen 2018*, 35; *Tangen 2009*, 832). Inclusion was also specified as a human value or an ideology, for instance, as an ideology in which all children should have an equal right to be educated in a regular classroom and as an ideal in educational policy (*Gunnþorsdóttir and Johannesson 2014*, 580–581; Köpfer & Óskardóttir, 2019*, 876–877). Democratic values, equality, and the acceptance of diversity focus attention on the political and fundamental premises of inclusion

Placement of SEN-students were defined as inclusive education focusing on SEN students access to attend a regular classroom, obtaining access to local schools or being placed in mainstream schools (*Engelbrecht et al. 2017*, 684–685; *Riitaoja, Helakorpi, and Holm 2019*, 586–587). Inclusion for instance explained, as the placement of SEN students as a way of teaching SEN students in the mainstream school (*Göransson et al. 2019*, 559–561; *Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013*, 96–97).

Participation and belongingness were defined as inclusive education embracing all students, for instance, the presence, participation, and achievement for all learners; and education with a sense of belonging (*Messiou 2019*, 769; *Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2019*, 159–161). Participation and achieving learning goal are essential in inclusive education (*Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013*, 96).

High quality learning for all students was understood as inclusion in terms of personalised teaching, high learning outcomes and participation in the learning community for all learners (*Chong 2018*, 502; *Nel et al. 2011*, 74).

One main finding is that inclusion is a contested and not a very clear concept, which may obscure different understandings, interpretations, and goals and the need for institutional changes (*Göransson et al. 2017*, 490).

Part 3: What themes emerged from the idea of inclusion into practice?

In the theoretical content analyses related to research question 3, three themes from different perspectives emerged focusing on the transformation from the idea of inclusion into practice: 1) *Placement, and the organisation of schooling*, 2) *Teachers' beliefs and attitudes*, and 3) *Students' and parents' experiences*.

Placement and the organisation of schooling is about how the idea of inclusion is transformed in practice regarding to location and organisation of teaching in a school for all. A gap between the idea of inclusion and the realisation in practice could be seen in a Norwegian study, in which the students were physically included in the classroom during social activities but received academic instruction outside the classroom in a smaller group (*Engevik, Næss, and Berntsen 2018*,45). The lack of coherence between 'special' and 'general' education seems to be a risk for the 'special education' of inclusion, according to *Köpfer and Óskarsdóttir (2019*,881). In addition, a Swedish study on educational leaders' explanations of student problems in school, leaders still seem to view difficulties in school as caused primarily by students' individual shortcomings (*Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013*,105–106). In another Swedish study, the conclusion was that there are many challenges related to administrative and organisational issues when implementing inclusive practices (*Persson 2013*,1218). To change values and routines in schools seems also to be challenging, even though the political rhetoric prescribes it and general policies on inclusion leave much space for interpretation at the municipal and school levels, and this results in extensive variation (*Ineland 2015*,68; Lakkala et al. 2016*, 52). Another way to implement the idea of inclusion into practice was reported in a study that showed how supervision could support inclusive teacherhood (Alila, Määttä, and Uusiautti 2016*,355). A barrier to educational psychology supervision of inclusion to schools was the budget cuts (Szulevicz and Tanggaard, 2014*, 48–49). A Swedish study found that feelings of belonging, membership and acceptance were necessary reaching the goal of inclusive classrooms (*Nilholm and Alm 2010*,245–246). In some articles, the need for structural changes was also mentioned as part of the concept of inclusion, for instance, in reference to the need to change the school system and the fact that structural considerations of inclusion are significant to policy production (*Laes and Schmidt 2016*,5–6; *Riitaoja, Helakorpi, and Holm 2019*,586–588). Paradoxically, the stress in policy on the creation of inclusive education seems to have resulted in an increase in the identification of students as SEN students (*Riddell et al. 2016*,489–490).

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes show how teachers' beliefs and attitudes are reflected in the articles in how their ideas of inclusion may have consequences for their practice. Teachers were included as the sample in most of the articles. Overall, the main finding showed that teachers are positive about the idea of inclusion (*Jerlinder, Danermark, and Gill 2010*,52; Yada et al. 2018*, 353). In a Norwegian study, the conclusion was that teachers who participated in a national school development programme had a broader understanding of inclusive education that implies meeting the diverse needs of all students (*Bjørnsrud and Nilsen 2019*,171). A Finnish study showed that teachers had many concerns about the consequences of the gap between policy and practice including students with SEN in the classroom and the school (*Savolainen et al. 2012*,68). A Swedish study concluded that different occupational groups in schools

have different ideas concerning how schools should organise inclusion of SEN students (*Lindqvist et al. 2011*,154). In another study, the results indicated that teachers experienced inclusion as an additional task (*Gunnþorsdóttir and Johannesson 2014*,597). The key to inclusive practice seemed to be proactive teachers as provide alternative ways to work inside and outside the classroom (*Laes and Schmidt 2016*,19). Nel and her colleagues (*Nel et al. 2011*,89) found that teachers' attitudes towards the practical application of inclusive education can be changed if they are provided with relevant information and necessary support. Another study reported the importance of educational leadership through observations and participation in the activities in the classroom (Linqvist and Nilholm 2014*, 74) Collaboration and Co-teaching was necessary to improve teachers' teaching strategies and ultimately stimulate the idea of inclusive practices (*Aas 2019*,12; *Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen, and Skogen 2019*,80; *Väyrynen and Paksuniemi 2018*,157–158; Malinen et al. 2013*, 43).

Students' and parents' experience was about students' and parents' perceptions of inclusion and explains their experiences of how the idea of inclusion is transformed in practice. Students participated in eight studies and parents in three, mainly based on qualitative methods and emphasised the importance of understanding students' perspectives to create an inclusive classroom.

The studies on students' experience, focus on how the school met their needs. The conclusion of a Norwegian study (*Tangen 2009*,840–841) stated that from the students' perspective 'quality of life' in school is important in developing inclusive practices. A Swedish study concludes that students' wellbeing, e.g. feeling safe and having a sense of belonging, were central (*Lundquist, Allodi, and Siljehag 2019*,957–961). As *Nilholm and Alm (2010*,250) pointed out, '[f]eelings of belonging, membership and acceptance on behalf of the students are necessary prerequisites in order to talk about inclusive classrooms'. A study from Denmark concluded that collaboration between teachers and students and listening to students' voices are central to making changes towards more inclusion in thinking and practice (*Messiou 2019,778).

Parents experienced of how the school succeeds with their child to be equally included was connected to their experiences of suitable structures, support and coping with stigma (*Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2010*,9). A Finnish study concluded that the more support their child needed the more importance the parents placed on special education practices and less the neighbourhood school allocation (*Lempinen and Niemi 2018*,108).

Discussion

The different ways to conceptualise inclusion and various approaches to practice in the Nordic countries is consistent with international studies about inclusion (Artiles et al., 2006; Amor et al. 2019). The understanding of inclusion as a human right and a democracy does not provide concrete guidelines for practice, while the understanding of including placement leads to concrete organisational measures (Barton and Armstrong 2007; *Cameron and Lindqvist 2014*). The results from the presented review are similar with studies internationally who argue that inclusion is not only about physical placement (*Engevik, Næss, and Berntsen 2018*; Thomazet 2009) Inclusion only defined as placement seemed to be a narrow understanding, and a problem that have not been

addressed in the analysed articles from a Nordic context. Therefore, we raise the question whether different understandings are a problem or not. Although placement important implementing inclusive practices, it does not need to involve human rights and democratic principles (Barton and Armstrong 2007; *Ineland 2015*).

Meeting the demand of inclusive education in a school for all is essential for ensuring human rights and democracy, which these values of inclusive educational policy give direction for practice. This can also be said for other ways of understanding and practicing included, and if the understanding is unreflected, there is still a risk that one cannot see how different types of approaches to practice may complement others. Affiliation, participation and learning outcomes are fundamental prerequisites for transforming the idea of inclusion into practice. Several ways of understanding inclusion give a broader perspective to the diverse and complex aspects in succeeding implementation of how inclusion can be realised in a school for all.

Few articles illuminating inclusion in Nordic schools addresses to students with special educational needs explicitly. This is also in line with the international understanding of inclusion as a democratic and universal principle (Nilholm and Göransson 2017). Considering this, focusing on specific categories or group orientation is contrary to the principle of inclusion. However, we have no reason to say that it is the universal understanding that this is the cause. It may just as well be the case that the real challenges of implementing inclusion are not recognised of the school administration. Universal principles are not promoted by ignoring special problems related to individual and SEN – students, and the fact that inclusive education is mainly seen as replacing the concept of special education.

Moreover, the organisation of schooling is not just about organisation of teaching, but also about leadership and organisation of teacher collaboration and teacher support of the individual educational needs. Thus, meeting social and academic needs as well as building learning communities in classrooms seem to be highlighted implementing the idea of inclusion into practice in Nordic schools as well (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, Nilsen 2020). Organization of teaching reflects the students' experiences of how they participate and benefit from the teaching (Haug 2020). The organisational dimension involves teachers' collaboration ensuring that all students obtain the support they need to develop their talents and achieve their learning goals within the learning community (Kurth and Gross 2014). Perhaps one of the most important issues of teacher collaboration in the Nordic context are to secure the connection between what happens in special education and ordinary education (*Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen, and Skogen 2019*). When teacher challenges are understood as caused by students' SEN and shortcomings, it is a long way to go before the idea of inclusion is realised. Therefore, organisational changes are needed to make it possible to realise the ideal.

Teachers' attitudes are important in the process of realising inclusion in practice, while powerlessness in relation to one's own opportunities can lead to negative reactions. We therefore highlight that the positivity to the idea of inclusion do not necessary are an expression of coming further than the idea of inclusion. This seems to be a challenge if we look to other Nordic studies were some reports that there is often a gap between policy and ideals and the realisation of the idea of inclusion in practice on the other (Haug 2017; Hjörne 2016; Jahnukainen 2015; Nilsen 2017). When the support system does not exist

and cooperation does not work, inclusion might easily be perceived as a burden. Attitudes can therefore be both cause and consequence. And for that reason, it is important to develop a support system for the teachers and helping them to work in teams if inclusive practice is to become a reality

In current review, the students and parents' experiences addressed a user perspective on inclusion (Haug 2020). Inclusion is understood as an internal perspective where the student perspective is crucial. Inclusive education is about students' experiences about their benefit from the teaching. It is striking that so few articles addressed the student perspective and the parent perspective. This indicates that subjective experience of wellbeing, quality of school life, recognition and belonging does not govern the inclusion thinking, but the external perspective as it appears to politicians, school leaders and teachers.

Methodical reflections and limitations

The method in this literature review is characterised by a combination of a systematic and a qualitative interpretive approach. By doing a systematic study with clear and transparent searches on databases, criteria, keywords and procedures, it is possible to replicate the search. Furthermore, an account is given of the coding of the included articles, and how the qualitative content analysis has been carried out, so that it is possible to follow a similar procedure in another study. In this case, the qualitative analysis has been strength, especially regarding the interpretation of the different perspectives on inclusion and inclusive education presented and what topics emerged in the sampled articles. Nevertheless, a qualitative content analysis naturally involves opportunities for a variety of interpretations, which in this respect may involve a methodical limitation. Nevertheless, a description of the methodological approach is a strength for the validity of the results in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of the presented literature review was to identify whether there is research in the Nordic countries that specifically deals with the issue of how to transform the idea of inclusion into practice, that involve students with SEN. The aim was to analyse research publications concerning the main topic in the Nordic countries that were published in English language, peer-reviewed journals between 2009 and 2019 to better understand the primary focus of the research in this area. The sampled articles included both qualitative and quantitative approaches as well as a mix method.

There are still many challenges and obstacles before the idea of inclusion is fully understood and realised. One main finding from the study of these articles is the existence of different understandings of inclusion. The understandings are mostly indirectly expressed and often unclear and unreflected. A consequence may be very different and hesitating ways of practicing inclusion and inclusive education. According to the articles, there is an overall ambition of inclusion, but more studies and research focusing on inclusive practices are needed. Among the different understandings of inclusion, we find both understanding of inclusion as a human right and a democracy and inclusion understood as physical placement. The first understanding is broad and fundamental. The second are narrow, more concrete, and practical. In a Nordic context there is

a need of addressing the limitations when it comes to inclusion understood as physical placement. The reason why this narrow understanding still exists may be about the challenges with realising fundamental principles, but also the need for guidelines that provide directions of how the school shall transform the idea of inclusion into practice.

High quality learning of all students is a main goal in the realising of inclusive education. Failure to address this overall goal overlooks an important challenge in an inclusive school for all. There is still a long way to go before the idea of inclusion is realised in practice, although there in a Nordic context, the idea and the ambition are fully accepted. Consequently, there is hope for inclusive education, but there is also a need for more qualitative studies and research focusing on inclusion and inclusive education both in theory and in practice in order to meet and realise the overall goal of inclusion in the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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