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Quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities – experiences from special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse how professionals in special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden – assistants, teachers and Special Education Needs Coordinators – understand and define quality in their daily interactions with students who have intellectual disabilities. Our analysis draws on data collected via a digital questionnaire, including both open-ended and standardised (Likert scale) questions. In this study, written excerpts from open-ended questions comprised the primary empirical data used in the analysis. 129 respondents provided a total of 289 statements concerning their views on quality in professional encounters. In order to explore the semantic content of the written excerpts, the empirical data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Our findings show that perceptions of quality can be categorised differentiated into three typological themes or aspects: individual, relational and contextual. Our findings also show that differences in responses – both frequency and content – appear to be associated with the respondents’ professional affiliation. Based on these findings, the article suggests the need for an established and shared theoretical basis – in education and practice – of what constitutes quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities.

Introduction and aim

This article reports on how professionals in special needs upper secondary schools view quality in their encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities in Sweden. The way in which the education system (and its professionals) responds to people with intellectual disabilities is generally viewed as an important aspect of quality. Teachers are expected to demonstrate professionalism through their attitudes and behaviours. They are also expected to be capable of critically evaluating how their knowledge and educational environment may influence professional encounters and enhance the quality of interactions with students (Hasenfeld 2010; Ineland and Hjelte 2018). However, given that, compared to students, teachers have greater insight into the education system and, consequently, have different insights into the knowledge upon which they act, these encounters are often described as asymmetrical in nature (Ineland, Molin, and Sauer 2019).
For people with intellectual disabilities, education is commonly viewed as being beneficial to their health and well-being and promoting participation in society. Education is also considered to be important for an individual’s social role and social status (Gordon and Burton 2006; Östlund and Johansson 2018). In addition, education and the ability to attend school have a socio-cultural value as they provide the prerequisites for social inclusion (Harmon, Kasa-Hendrickson, and Neal 2009). At the same time, neoliberal principles have resulted in an increased emphasis on the external aspects of professionalism, such as prescriptive frameworks, formal skills and transparency (Fisher and Byrne 2012). Emotional commitment and relational aspects could also be key elements of what constitutes professionalism in the field of human services (Fisher and Byrne 2012; Ruppar, Roberts, and Olson 2017).

This multiplicity of influencing factors is challenging in itself but may be even more so for teachers who work with students who have intellectual disabilities (White and Mason 2006; Noone and Hastings 2009). For example, teachers are expected to manage the balancing act of treating students with intellectual disabilities as autonomous individuals with equal rights and expectations, similar to other students, without disregarding their intellectual disabilities and need for adjustments and special support in order to attain equal outcomes in a given task (cf. Bigby and Frawley 2010).

Consequently, ethical awareness and the ability to decide and act within a framework of professional accountability are key features of quality in the school system. Also, we view quality as characteristics of an object or a phenomenon that gives it its ability to satisfy pronounced and implied needs (cf. National Board of Health and Welfare 2002, 74). Although professionalism and professional encounters are seen as an important aspect of implementing policies and ethical guidelines into practice, there are few bodies of research that explicitly focus on the characteristics of quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities. Instead, previous studies have examined the effects of teacher-student interaction in relation to school belonging (Crouch, Keys, and McMahon 2014) and how different professional strategies may facilitate student development (Shepherd, Hoban, and Dixon 2014; Yun-Ching and Carter 2013). Other studies have been more focused on how contextual circumstances such as policies regarding inclusion or empowerment are expressed in everyday interactions between teachers and students (see, for example, Finlay et al. 2008). However, Ineland and Hjelte (2018) have drawn attention to what characterises quality in professional encounters with people with intellectual disabilities. The authors primarily had comparative ambitions and analysed the differences and similarities in the views and perceptions of professionals working in social services, health care and schools.

Overall, given the educational context outlined here, actors such as assistants, teachers and Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) have a key role in creating and maintaining successful outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities (cf. Mackenzie 2007; Abbott 2007). As highlighted by Schalock et al. (2018), the complex needs of people with intellectual disabilities benefits from a variety of professionals who work in collaboration. Their theoretical perspectives help broaden and deepen the basis for intervention and support, which helps to organise the relevant information and successfully translate it into practice. In relation to intellectual disabilities, they have identified four common theoretical perspectives: biomedical (genetic factors), psychoeducational (learning limitations), sociocultural (individual/environment relationship) and justice/legal (human and
legal rights). Our study rests on the assumption that one feature of quality in the activities of these actors is their ability to demonstrate ethical awareness through professional assessments and make decisions and act within a framework of professional accountability. However, what does it mean to make decisions, act and behave in a professional manner towards people with intellectual disabilities in an educational context? Based on this line of argument, the aim of this article is to analyse how professionals in special needs upper secondary schools – assistants, teachers and SENCOs – understand and define quality in their daily interactions with students who have intellectual disabilities.

**The institutional context of special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden**

Since the 1960s, the concept of normalisation has been a key concept and conceptual banner in Swedish disability policy, setting the stage for deinstitutionalisation and de-differentiation in service provision (Ineland 2016; Tøssebro 2016). Expanding in the 1990s, community living and acceptable living conditions for all have been strongly emphasised. A ‘society for all’ has been a guiding principle in the planning, organising and implementing of various organisational settings and support systems that provide services for people with disabilities (Ineland and Hjelte 2018). In recent decades, disability policies have developed from a strong belief in large-scale and centralised public services to an increased emphasis on individual freedom, diversity and freedom of choice (Ineland, Molin, and Sauer 2019). This ideological turn has paved the way for more local initiatives and greater discretion amongst professionals to organise and implement support, not least in the education system.

Educational policies in Sweden have become increasingly more inclusive and the trend has been to integrate special needs education as much as possible in all compulsory and upper secondary schools (Hotulainen and Takala 2014; Hausstätter 2014). The educational system, as well as the public sector in general, have also been characterised by a transition from governing by rules to management by goals and results (Persson 2008). A centralised school system has been replaced by a system in which the state sets goals and local stakeholders determine the means of achieving these goals (cf. Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011). Teachers are also expected to perceive and respond to disability and special needs as resources (Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011; Ineland 2015, 2016).

It is important to acknowledge two recent changes in the Swedish educational system as they provide an institutional framework for this study and have affected special needs upper secondary schools: the new Education Act (2010: 800) and the 2013 reformation of special needs upper secondary schools (SOU 2011, 8). In sum, the intentions of the reforms were manifold: to increase community fellowship and participation; to increase the collaboration between upper secondary schools and special needs upper secondary schools; to equalise education by creating new structures for national programmes; to provide flexibility by meeting the needs of every student; to provide good preparation for working life; to give meaning to adult life by gaining a profession (prop. 2011/12:50). In addition, special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden have also been increasingly affected by market demands and the pressures of performativity that impact teachers’ daily work (Lunneblad and Dance 2014). As explained by Lunneblad and Dance (2014), with reference to Ball (2006), performativity is a mode of regulation in which individual and organisational ‘performance’ serve as measures of output or displays of ‘quality’ (299).
Consequently, teachers need to focus on formal structures and impression management, while there is a risk that students’ needs and knowledge become less important (see also Clarke 2012). There is also a risk of schools and teachers being pulled in different directions and promoting competing ideas about what is desirable and appropriate in a given context.

The new Education Act (2010: 800) stipulates that the primary aim of special needs upper secondary schools is to ‘provide students with intellectual disabilities with a tailored education that will provide them with a good basis for gainful employment and further studies, as well as for personal development and active participation in society’ (chapter 18, section 2). In order for these aims to be realised, assistants, teachers and SENCOs have an important role to play and their way of thinking and acting will affect the school situation of students with intellectual disabilities. However, studies on the views of teachers and other school professionals on what constitutes quality in encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities are scarce. Even more so in relation to comparative analysis when respondents’ professions and educational background is taken into analysis. This study responds to this limited research as it aims to raise awareness about how these differences reflect how the respondents understand and define quality in their daily interactions with students with intellectual disabilities.

Method

Design and data collection

The present research is based on a subsample of a large-scale study conducted by the authors to explore professional experiences and perceptions when working in the field of intellectual disabilities services. The analysis draws on data collected through a digital questionnaire distributed via email. Information about the project was included in the email together with the researchers’ names and contact information. The questionnaire was developed by the second author and contains demographic information (e.g. gender, age, education, work experience) followed by questions about policy, leadership and direct care work (e.g. ideology, goals, skills, collaboration, job satisfaction, experiences of difficult situations, quality in professional encounters, etc.). Both open-ended and standardised (Likert scale) questions were included.

Open-ended questions enabled the respondents to describe the content and context of their experiences in detail. The primary empirical data used in the analysis were excerpts from the open-ended question: ‘What characterises quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities?’ The respondents made a total of 289 statements concerning their views on quality in professional encounters. The use of written excerpts prevented further follow-up questions, which could possibly have reduced the depth of the data. However, taking our research aim into account, we have considered written excerpts to be relevant to this type of inquiry.

Respondents

The present analysis includes 129 respondents who were recruited through an educational network representing 12 municipalities in four regions in Northern and Southern
Sweden. The municipalities’ populations ranged from 7,000 to 130,000 inhabitants. Through this network, we received the contact information of schools in the region and approached school principals who notified the respondents about the project.

The respondents comprised assistants, teachers and SENCOs all working with students who have intellectual disabilities in special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden. SENCOs are responsible for issues related to students with special needs and work with several partners, including teachers, parents, students, teaching assistants and external agencies (Cowne 2005). Besides teaching individual students, the role of a SENCO also includes supervising teachers, conducting assessments and designing and evaluating different interventions at different levels (Jortveit et al. 2019). An assistant is a common form of support for students with intellectual disabilities in a Swedish school setting (Eriksson 2005). This support is primarily given to help a student function in the classroom. Often, the task of the assistant is to structure the various activities of the student. Table 1 shows the response rate and demographic characteristics of the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Demographic statistics of respondents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Educational Needs coordinators (SENCOs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of excerpts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female/Male (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of professional experience (mean)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Standard deviation in parentheses).

Analysis

In order to explore the semantic content of the written excerpts, the empirical data were analysed using descriptive techniques and primarily using thematic content analysis, in which codes and categories were developed and revised on a step-by-step basis (Mayring 2000). Braun and Clarke (2006) stages of thematic analysis inspired this approach.

First, all excerpts were read and re-read by both authors in order to become acquainted with the material as a whole. Second, the authors coded the excerpts and developed tentative categories individually. Synonyms and different grammatical forms (e.g. definite/indefinite articles, singular/plural) were considered semantically equivalent and were therefore classified under the same codes. Third, the codes and categories were reviewed and refined by both researchers jointly. Since we analysed content (not individual responses), the frequency of responses did not equal the number of respondents. It would have been possible to generate more categories but we believe that our chosen level of abstraction is sufficient for identifying what are clearly different understandings in relation to perceptions about quality in professional encounters in an educational context.

In addition to this stepwise analytical approach, descriptive numerical analyses were used to complement the qualitative analyses. By measuring the frequency of responses, i.e. the number of times a category is mentioned by the respondent, as well as the average percentage of a category, we have not only been able to grasp the semantic content of our empirical data, but also its composition and professional context. We want to argue
that such quantification helps to describe and discover patterns and regularities in the material (see also Sandelowski 2000) and also avoids weighting single comments too heavily and generalising findings too quickly (Schilling 2009). The analytical strategy has previously been used in research on human service professionals conducted by Ineland and colleagues (see e.g. Ineland, Molin, and Sauer 2018; Ineland and Hjelte 2018).

**Ethical considerations**

Our research complies with the ethical principles of research in the humanities and social sciences according to the codex of the Swedish Research Council (Codex 2011). The researchers took the appropriate measures with regard to access, informed consent and confidentiality. Information regarding the aim and objectives of the study, ethical guidelines and method of data collection was given both orally (at information meetings) and in writing (in a cover note attached to the questionnaire). As the data were not defined as sensitive personal data according to the Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (2003: 460), it was not necessary to refer the study to the regional board for the vetting of research ethics.

**Findings**

In this section, we report our main findings on quality amongst professionals in the educational system in Sweden who work with students who have intellectual disabilities. This study contributes by showing that perceptions of quality are categorised into three typological themes: individual, relational and contextual characteristics. Our findings relate to these three themes and it is our belief that the findings help address the complexity of professional encounters with students who have intellectual disability. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes. We have presented our findings in accordance with these themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes (% of responses)</th>
<th>Subthemes (No. of excerpts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual characteristics (33)</td>
<td>Knowing the person (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal attributes (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational characteristics (48)</td>
<td>Adaptive (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsive (93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual characteristics (19)</td>
<td>Professional knowledge (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideology (40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual characteristics**

Individual characteristics comprised 33% of all responses and referred to descriptions of important aspects of knowledge and self-awareness on the individual level that are necessary for engaging in appropriate and qualitative encounters. One subtheme was the importance of *knowing the person* who had an intellectual disability. This was described in terms of knowing both the strengths and weaknesses of the student, but also knowing the student well enough to understand why they acted the way they did.
One respondent stated the following: ‘A good encounter requires you to know the student well and understand why the student acts the way they do’ (R70, teacher).

Another subtheme was **personal attributes**, which relates to the professionals’ awareness of key features of the personal characteristics that are necessary in order to engage in appropriate and qualitative encounters. One frequently mentioned characteristic was being positive, which was often described using single words like ‘positive’, ‘humorous’ or ‘optimistic’. Patience was another characteristic, also often described using a single word (patience) and its meaning was not further elaborated. Commitment was another characteristic, which, like the previous characteristics, was primarily expressed using single words. It was also stated that being empathetic was important, which the respondents mainly described in terms of ‘empathy’, ‘understanding’, ‘kindness’ or ‘humility’. In addition, being open-minded was regarded as an essential characteristic and related to meeting students with no preconceptions and also being open about the professionals’ own learning in interactions with students. One respondent described the learning aspect as ‘Learning from your own mistakes when you don’t understand’ (R45, teacher).

As far as individual characteristics are concerned, it can be noted from the empirical material that it was mainly personal attributes that were described by the respondents. While 86 excerpts describe key features of the professionals, only nine excerpts describe the importance of having detailed knowledge of the individual student. It is also worth noting that it was primarily assistants and teachers who emphasised the importance of having knowledge of the individual student. In addition to assistants (three excerpts) and teachers (five excerpts), only one SENCO emphasised this.

**Relational characteristics**

Relational characteristics refer to attributes of the interaction with students who have intellectual disabilities. These characteristics contained the most responses in our empirical inquiry (48%) and were divided into two subthemes: adaptive and responsive approaches. An **adaptive** approach refers to the professionals’ ability to adjust their behaviours and expectations to students with intellectual disabilities. Some of the characteristics mentioned refer to adapting to the special needs of students with intellectual disabilities as a group. One example was expressed in relation to the need to give students sufficient time to solve tasks, which one of the respondents described as being a question of ‘understanding’ in order to give students time to learn (R103, special needs teacher). Another aspect of adaptation at a group level referred to the need to be explicit and direct. One respondent described this as a question of being ‘one step ahead, explaining, showing clarity and having clear schedules’ (R27, assistant). While clarity was emphasised, several respondents also stressed the importance of adopting a flexible and individualised approach. One respondent described the relationship between clarity and flexibility as follows: ‘It might sound contradictory but it is necessary to have a structure at work. However, it must not overlook the ability to deal with the unexpected’ (R101, SENCO).

The importance of individualisation was also mentioned by several respondents in relation to their ambition to place reasonable demands on a student. Such demands could differ between students and one respondent described it as follows: ‘I show understanding and do not make great demands but I’m also brave enough to increase...’
the demands I make as the student grows older. Whatever it takes for the student to have the best possible life!' (R25, assistant). Another aspect of striving for individualisation related to adapting the communication between the professional and a student. According to one respondent, this adaptation could mean not being ironic or telling jokes and another respondent emphasised the importance of studying the student's reaction to adapting the language.

The other subtheme, a responsive approach, referred to the professionals' ability to respond adequately to students with intellectual disabilities. This responsiveness includes an awareness that students with intellectual disabilities may not communicate in the same way as students with no intellectual disabilities. One aspect that was mentioned was the importance of acknowledging the student. This had an ethical dimension in that it aimed to acknowledge the student's value in itself. In some cases, this acknowledgement was described using single words such as [show] respect, acceptance or affirmation. However, several respondents described it in slightly more detail. For example, these respondents stressed the need for tailored communication aimed directly at each student in order to acknowledge them as unique individuals with their own integrity and self-determination. One respondent described it as 'not talking over the head of a student or talking through others’ (R16, assistant). In addition, several respondents considered that this communication was not all about how to talk to students with intellectual disabilities but was also about the professionals' ability to listen to them properly. The importance of listening could be seen as a general aspect of communication, although several respondents emphasised that the need is further accentuated in students with developmental disabilities. One respondent described it as follows: ‘With students who have intellectual disabilities you have to be even better at listening’ (R94, SENCO).

The respondents also emphasised the importance of responsiveness as an educational tool with the aim of helping students with intellectual disabilities to develop. In this sense, several respondents emphasised the importance of being sensitive to the interests and capabilities of students with intellectual disabilities in order to contribute to their growth and increased self-esteem. One of the teachers described this as follows: ‘Listen to what they’re saying and make use of their interests in order to capture their attention. You can count toy cars during maths, sort them by colour, etc.’ (R59, teacher). Another respondent described it as follows: ‘My task is to follow the student and, through communication, do something that contributes to learning, self-confidence and awareness’ (R63, teacher).

**Contextual characteristics**

Contextual characteristics comprised 19% of all responses and referred to descriptions of how contextual circumstances influence the professionals' encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities. The respondents' descriptions were divided into two subthemes: knowledge and ideology. Regarding professional knowledge, one aspect referred to knowledge of intellectual disabilities and how it could be used as a basis for understanding why students with intellectual disabilities act like they do. One of the SENCOs described it as follows: ‘the ability to meet students where they are, understanding that they are teens with all that this implies but still knowing that inside they are 6–8-year olds. It’s important to understand their difficulties’ (R133, SENCO). Another aspect mentioned was knowledge of environmental conditions. The respondents referred to several
different characteristics as being related to the environment. One respondent stressed the importance of the environment for feeling safe and comfortable for students with intellectual disabilities. One respondent also believed that the learning environment could explain unwanted behaviours while another respondent stated that it was important to adapt the environment so that a student has good opportunities for development.

The subtheme ideology comprised responses that related quality to commonly understood and legitimate ideological notions in the field of intellectual disabilities. The most frequently mentioned notion referred to the idea of normality and that students with intellectual disabilities should be viewed as ordinary people. The following excerpt was typical of expressions about the idea of normality: ‘Just like all individuals; a respectful encounter in which the student can feel acknowledged, respected and valued’ (R58, teacher).

Another aspect of ideology was the need to see the unique person behind the intellectual disability. This aspect was more explicitly based on an anti-labelling approach; students should not be equated with their diagnoses, which highlights the uniqueness of the individual. Common descriptions were: ‘All people are different, intellectual disability or not’ (R2, assistant), or ‘Always see the student and focus on the student’ (R30, teacher).

A third aspect of ideology referred to equality, which described basic human values and stated that students with intellectual disabilities are complete human beings in their own right. Typical responses were: ‘All individuals are equally worthy. Everyone should feel needed’ (R13, assistant) or ‘Respect for the equal value of all people’ (R35, teacher).

As far as the contextual conditions are concerned, it is worth noting that there were relatively few excerpts (14) that highlighted the importance of knowledge in comparison to ideology (40) and, in many cases, ideological statements stressed the uniqueness of the individual. It could also be noted that, in principle, it was the specially trained professionals who stressed the need for taking into account knowledge of disabilities or the environment. Apart from one teacher, only SENCOs (13 excerpts) expressed the need to consider these characteristics in relation to encountering students with intellectual disabilities. None of the assistants mentioned this.

**Discussion and implications for practice**

This article investigates how professionals in special needs upper secondary schools – assistants, teachers and SENCOs – view quality in their encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities in special needs upper secondary schools in Sweden.

A main finding of our study is that perceptions of quality in professional encounters with students in special needs upper secondary schools comprise three different typological themes: individual, relational and contextual (see Figure 1). Another main finding is that differences in responses – both frequency and content – appear to be associated with the respondents’ professional affiliation. In this final section, we draw on these typological themes to discuss how and why they have the potential to raise awareness of ethical and professional issues when engaging in education in special needs upper secondary schools. We are not seeking to explain the relationship between individual, relational and contextual characteristics, but believe that our findings offer new insights into addressing, understanding and discussing quality in professional encounters with people with intellectual disabilities in an educational context.
The different types of typological themes presented in Figure 1 also express different perspectives on intellectual disability. Individual characteristics place emphasis on individual traits related to the role of being ‘professional’ (cf. Svensson, Johnsson, and Laanemets 2008) which, in this study, included self-awareness, kindness, being empathic, witty, positive, etc. These characteristics also involved descriptions of the importance of being familiar with individuals (e.g. students), which suggests that professional experiences – knowledge of the weaknesses and strengths, preferences and ambitions of each individual – are important prerequisites for ethical awareness and behaviour and, consequently, for establishing quality. What we have thematised as individual and relational characteristics may be interpreted as an expression of a psychoeducational perspective on intellectual disabilities that emphasises the limitations in learning and adaptation skills and is therefore related to interventions such as counselling and special education interventions (Schalock et al. 2018). However, while the former primarily emphasises the appropriate personal traits among professionals, the latter more explicitly relates quality to face-to-face interactions and primarily places emphasis on the ability to be ‘one step ahead’ in order to acknowledge, adapt and respond to individual needs and preferences (cf. Shepherd, Hoban, and Dixon 2014; Yun-Ching and Carter 2013). Responsiveness and sensitivity to individuality was also assumed to ‘improve the students’ learning abilities’ but also to ‘increase their self-esteem’ and make them ‘grow as people’. To further theorise the findings in the present study, we suggest that what we termed contextual characteristics coincides with what Schalock et al. (2018) call sociocultural and justice/legal perspectives. While the sociocultural perspective emphasises a mismatch between the individual and the surrounding environment in understanding disability, the justice
perspective primarily draws attention to legal aspects and human rights issues. The sociocultural perspective emerged in the respondents’ descriptions of contextual conditions (e.g. learning environment) while the justice perspective was evident in relation to ideology as a safeguard so that those who depend on others in various parts of their lives will receive adequate support and quality in their dealings with professionals. These excerpts commonly draw on ideas of ‘normality’ and that people (students) with intellectual disabilities should be viewed as ordinary people.

Another contribution of the article is that it reveals differences in perceptions of the quality of encounters between different actors who work with students who have intellectual disabilities. It was primarily teachers and assistants – not SENCOs – who emphasised the personal characteristics of individual students were an important feature of quality, whereas it was primarily SENCOs who emphasised the environmental setting as an important prerequisite for quality. In this sense, it was mainly SENCOs who emphasised a sociocultural perspective on quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities. These findings are in line with Yazbeck, McVilly, and Parmenter (2004) who claim that level of education may influence professionals’ attitudes. One plausible explanation could be that SENCOs are responsible for issues related to students with special needs (Cowne 2005) and have therefore received specialist training about taking social and environmental aspects into account when dealing with potentially disabling situations in schools. Thus, the greater emphasis of SENCOs on sociocultural perspectives may be associated with their professional training and level of education in relation to the special needs of students with intellectual disabilities.

In addition, differences in responses also reflect the respondents’ diverse roles and tasks as professionals, indicating that they are subject to different expectations and cultures, providing them with different norms, values and views of reality (cf. Svensson, Johnsson, and Laanemets 2008). SENCOs are more expected to be experts on issues related to intellectual disabilities that involve multiple stakeholders such as teachers, assistants, parents and students. Such expectations of SENCOs’ roles and tasks are associated with conceptions of what special education can be (von Ahlefeld Nisser 2014), including supervising teachers, but also designing and evaluating different interventions (Jortveit et al. 2019). Although not apparent in our data, it is reasonable to assume that both teachers and assistants face other expectations from various stakeholders when engaging with students who have intellectual disabilities. For example, assistants are expected to provide individualised support on a daily basis to one or a few students. We believe these differences in roles and tasks is one of the explanatory factors behind different ideas and perceptions of quality in encounters with students who have intellectual disability.

**Limitations**

When interpreting the results, some limitations should be taken into account. First, the limited empirical data and the different recruitment strategies limit the ability to generalise the findings to a wider population. Thus, the respondents cannot be viewed as being representative of professionals in special needs upper secondary schools in general. Another limitation is that our analysis is based exclusively on written excerpts, which prevented further follow-up questions and possibly reduced the depth of our data.
Nevertheless, we believe that our empirical data are relevant to the kind of research questions addressed in the current article. Lastly, our research was conducted in a Swedish welfare context, which limits the possibilities of generalising the results to other cultures, countries and welfare systems. Taken together, this calls for further empirical research. One potential avenue of research would be to gain deeper knowledge of why different professional groups have partly different views on what constitutes quality in encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities. Research would also benefit from applying a comparative approach to quality in order to enhance knowledge of professional views and experiences in different welfare regimes and educational settings. Finally, further research would also provide new insights through an in-depth qualitative analysis of students’ own experiences and understandings of what constitutes quality in their encounters with teachers and other professionals in special needs upper secondary schools.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this study show that quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities in special needs upper secondary schools is categorised in two ways. First, our study shows that quality in professional encounters involves three typological themes – individual, relational and contextual. Second, this study also suggests that different groups of school professionals tend to place emphasis differently across these three themes. Overall, we believe that our findings are a step forward to understanding the complexity of professional/student relationships in special needs upper secondary schools. We also believe that our findings have important ethical implications, considering that students may encounter different professional opinions about their school situation and prerequisites for learning. In order to avoid these kinds of situations, this study suggests that a shared understanding of what constitutes successful learning environments and quality in contact with students who have intellectual disabilities is of vital importance, not least because it has the potential to facilitate cooperation between different professional groups and prevent different perspectives from adversely affecting students.

Given the results of this study, we suggest that a shared theoretical basis – in education as well as in practice – would create better prerequisites for professional collaboration and also a practice in which students may meet professionals with more similar and holistic views on what constitutes quality in professional encounters with students who have intellectual disabilities. Delving further into these aspects would also help to understand how to establish more inclusive educational environments for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Disclosure Statement**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest
Notes on contributors

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