This is the published version of a paper published in *Education Inquiry*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Ineland, J. (2015)
Logics and ambivalence: professional dilemmas during implementation of an inclusive education practice.
*Education Inquiry*, 6(1): 53-71
http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.26157

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-98695
Logics and ambivalence – professional dilemmas during implementation of an inclusive education practice

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Abstract

Although inclusion has been a value set forth in international policy arenas and a focus for school development research indicate the problems in establishing more inclusive practices. Although teachers may favor an inclusive model of education, they may experience difficulties in the implementation of inclusive practices. The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the professional experiences of a policy-driven, top-down-initiated inclusive practice in a municipally in northern Sweden. The empirical data is based on qualitative interviews with four teachers, two from special school and two from compulsory school. The result show a professional ambivalence in relation to introduction and information, cooperation and views on inclusion. The results are analyzed from an institutional viewpoint and point out that two institutional logics are apparent in the study. On the on hand an educational logic, which is formal/ideological and contains norms and values connected to ideological ideals such as normality, equality, and inclusion. On the other hand, a social logic, which was, not informal, but vague and pragmatic were differentiation and disability were key aspects. Consequently, important inter-professional aspects during an implementation process, such as information, cooperation, and views of inclusion, were characterized by ambivalence. To conclude, the article add to the discussion of challenges – administrative, organizational, practical – in implementing new discursive practices within inclusive education as norms and values, routines, and rituals are not easily changed, regardless of political rhetoric.

Keywords: ambivalence, cooperation, intellectual disabilities, institutional logics, inclusive education

Introduction and aim

Although inclusion has been included as a value in international policy arenas and entails a focus on school development (UNESCO 1994; Ainscow, 1998; Booth and Ainscow, 2002), studies indicate there are problems in establishing more inclusive practices (Ekström 2004; Nilholm et al. 2007; Hausstätter 2014). Sweden is a welfare state where equality and inclusiveness are central values for educational policies. Regarding educational policy, the trend has been to emphasise including students with special educational needs. The overall aim has been to integrate special needs education as much as possible in all secondary and upper secondary comprehensive schools (Hotulainen and Takala 2014; Hausstätter 2014). Another trend is that the...
educational enterprise, as well as the public sector more generally, are being run by reference to dominant national goals, which is apparent in the transition from governing by rules to managing by goals and results (Persson 2008). The centralised school system has been replaced with a system in which the state sets goals and local stakeholders determine the means to achieve those goals (Göransson, Nilholm and Karlsson 2011). For teachers, this development has been challenging in their daily work. They are expected to not only implement ideological principles such as individualisation and freedom of choice but also to view and respond to disability and special needs as resources. Teachers have a significant scope of action to interpret and exercise an ideology that stipulates that students with special needs are situated as being not with problems but in problems (Nilholm 2012). Put differently, students with special educational needs have, formally speaking, become increasingly perceived as a social problem (Göransson et al. 2012). However, some researchers argue that the way schools are organised implies a deficit perspective in which individual needs and problems are viewed as individual shortcomings (Nilholm et al. 2013; Göransson et al. 2011; Cameron, Nilholm and Persson 2012). Thus, although inclusive education is based on good intentions to establish inclusive and accessible learning environments for all students, fragmented organisational structures, professional attitudes together with vague guiding principles for inter-professional collaboration may make practical implications difficult to coordinate and expose the day-to-day work to different understandings and interpretations. The work may be further complicated since the different types of schools, for example, compulsory and special schools, by virtue of their historical, political and ideological history, have shaped certain norms and values as well as routines and rituals for daily work.

Therefore, inclusive education involves both opportunities and threats. There are opportunities in terms of increased professional cooperation and the possibility to support students with complex needs and improve the quality of their learning. There are threats in terms of professional ambiguity in relation to roles and responsibilities and how to understand, interpret and implement the very idea of inclusive education. In studies on change in education, Fullan (1991) identified three important stages through which effective changes progress: initiation, implementation and institutionalisation. For the initiation stage to be effective, participants (for example, teachers) must understand the relevance of the change. There also must be opportunities to prepare through support and training as well as the provision of resources – not at least time. The implementation stage is important but often the least well prepared for because it is assumed that, if the first stage went well, everything else will naturally fall into place. For successful implementation, Fullan argues, responsibilities in collaboration must be defined, and there must be opportunities to review and reflect on the progress. The last stage, institutionalisation, is when the initial idea – for example, inclusive work methods – becomes an automatic and established part of practice. This is best achieved through the skills and support
of teachers, the removal of competing priorities, and the ability to learn from collective experience. In all, change in educational practice may be challenging for teachers and collaborating actors. As pointed out by Forlin (2010) and Leung and Mak (2010), the role of teachers is critical because core concepts for professional actions, such as special needs or inclusive education, are often perceived through pre-defined and well-established solutions and interpreted in accordance with not only ideological but also structural conditions. Thus, teachers may favour inclusive models but experience difficulties in implementing an inclusive practice because of the organisational and structural premises in the school environment (Shevlin et al. 2013).

This article focuses on the implementation of an inclusive education practice in a municipality in northern Sweden, where students with intellectual disabilities (ID) from two special schools were integrated into a compulsory school. The aim is to analyse how the teachers involved in the project experienced the implementation process. The analysis focuses primarily on the understandings and perceptions held by two different categories of teachers: teachers from compulsory schools (TCS) and teachers from special schools (TSS).

**Method and data collection**

This study examines teachers’ experiences in the implementation of an inclusive school environment. Accordingly, the study is qualitative, and the approach is explorative and best described as a case-based qualitative study (Marshall and Rossman 2010; Yin 2009). Since I used a qualitative research method, I conducted the investigation in a naturalist context (Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen 2009) where I, therefore, approached the empirical context with a reflective and holistic view (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Cassell and Symon 2004).

Three schools in a municipality in northern Sweden were involved in the project analysed in this article. Two special schools (grades 1–3 and 4–6) were integrated – geographically and institutionally – with one of the main compulsory schools. The project was administered by a project leader and a steering group that included the school district manager, the principals concerned (three principals, based on school grades 1–3, 4–6 and 7–9), the special school coordinator, and the manager for the school health services. According to this project plan, the project’s primary aim was to establish an inclusive school environment based on equality and accessibility for all students, regardless of their opportunities, prerequisites and needs. The empirical data are based on in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews with teachers (N = 2) from the special schools (TSS) and teachers (N = 2) from the compulsory school (TCS). The interviews were conducted in a peaceful place after school, recorded and transcribed verbatim. The informants had been assigned as process leaders who were responsible for assisting and facilitating the implementation process. While this study touches upon work methods and professional attitudes during this
process, I also believe that the impact of institutional environments is important to consider in further research on inclusive education.

Qualitative content analysis was used in which the construction of themes was inductive and gradually inspired more by theoretical concepts and perspectives from an institutional theoretical perspective in organisational analysis, which is used in the article. The first phase involved reading through the transcript of the interviews in order to make brief notes on categories and units of similar content. In this phase, the analysis aimed to achieve a condensed description, in content and perceptions, from the main categories the teachers talked about. The content was organised in broad categories based on common themes and included, for example, views on inclusion, daily work, leadership, methods, and intellectual disabilities. In the second phase, these themes were condensed into more general categories in which the theoretical approach and concepts influenced the analysis. These general categories structured the results.

**Theoretical approach**

This article draws on institutional theory (see Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 1995; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Although institutional theory is not specifically oriented to public organisations, the hypothesis and characteristics of its interpretation patterns are suitable for the context. In the article, *institution* is essential since it determines how the world should be perceived and provides actors with desirable objectives. They shape the actions and strategies that can and should be carried out in an organisation. Although *institution* and *organisation* share many similarities, there are also distinct differences. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that institutions are ideas about social activities and how they should be organised. Thus, an institution is first a set of cultural rules that may regulate social activities in a patterned way. Organisations, in contrast, have a location and an address since they are materialised institutions. Ahrene (1994) observed that organisations have a different relation to human actors and a more pronounced position in everyday life. One assumption in institutional theory is that formal organisational structures are built around institutional rules that organisations use to legitimise their activities (Meyer and Scott 1983; Scott 1995). To be perceived as viable, public organisations must adapt to changes to win and maintain support from the institutional environment. Organisations are viewed not as rational and consistent but largely as open systems that are sensitive to expectations in the institutional environment (see Scott 1995; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Thus, organisations depend on institutional – more than technical – effectiveness to receive legitimacy and credibility that they (as an organisation) can and should be responsible for certain activities or individuals. However, the need for legitimacy may create internal tensions since organisations, at least symbolically, must relate to sometimes conflicting requirements and expectations from the outside world. Different expectations of the institutional
environment may form different internal attitudes to how activities should be organised, governed and managed (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Thus, organisations – and the way activities are organised – at the same time create opportunities and limitations for what is viewed as desirable and appropriate.

An important concept in this article is institutional logic, which “underpin[s] the appropriateness of organizational practices in given settings and at particular historical moments” (Greenwood et al. 2010, 2). Institutional logics are socially constructed assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals in organisational contexts produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Institutional logics establish a framework within which knowledge claims are situated and provide the rules by which the claims are validated and challenged (Scott 1994). However, in daily practice, due to different expectations from the outside world actors may have to comply with multiple and often contradictory logics that can create conflicts and uncertainty (Novotna 2014). Norwich (2008) argued that this might influence teachers to strive to have it both ways as much as possible. However, this balancing act can be difficult and leave residual tensions, as some participants in the Norwich study also recognised. The assumed basic dilemma in his study was whether to recognise differences or not, since both options have negative implications or risks associated with stigma, devaluation, rejection, or denial of opportunities. The project analysed in this article has similar characteristics. The twofold authority structure of public and political authorities means that the teachers of compulsory and special schools are likely to be confronted with multiple logics in their day-to-day work (also see Pache and Santos 2010). Formal structure, then, may impose conflicting demands which at the same time create opportunities for collaboration and new arrangements but also potential conflicts and resistance. It is one thing to endorse ideas of professional collaboration in inclusive education, and another – more complicated – to actually administer, coordinate and implement collaborative activities in practice and achieve satisfactory results.

**Results**

Before the implementation process started, representatives from the three schools, school administrators, teachers and leaders created a project plan which stipulated the project’s vision and formal aims and objectives. The plan stated that inclusive education was considered a best practice and consisted of opportunities to coordinate efforts to include ‘new’ students in the day-to-day pedagogical practice. The expected results with this new environment, stipulated in the project plan, included the possibility of developing stimulating and inclusive school environments for all students, establish inclusive work methods, increase professional awareness among the teachers at special schools and compulsory schools, and that the new (inclusive) school environment should become a competence centre and a role model for other
schools working with inclusion. However, the project plan did not explicitly state how to develop and implement inclusive methods or how the teachers from the different types of schools should cooperate. The interviews revealed that teachers experienced a ‘mismatch’ between the official aims and more practical arrangements:

In the beginning, there was a lot of focus on inclusion, students with ID should be placed in compulsory classes, that’s how they viewed inclusion, and it felt like a top-down governed project. But placing students with ID in regular classes was not a desirable goal for either the special school or the compulsory school (TCS).

In part, this follows from a lack of time to discuss practical issues such as how to think, act and work in order to implement inclusive work methods. According to the project plan, this was to be done through cooperation between different categories of teachers and students which would, in effect, form a school, not differentiated but a whole. Such an environment would have a number of positive effects, for example create a stimulating learning environment for students from special schools and compulsory schools, develop cooperation opportunities between the TSS and the TCS, and increase professionalism and pedagogical awareness. However, this was challenging since the way professionals act and think – the TSS and the TCS – is embedded in organisational, structural and cultural differences. The following quote from one TCS is illustrative:

One big issue was how much we should work together. That was a big question mark. We asked ourselves many different questions, e.g., if they [students with ID] would attend my classes, or what … and how this cooperation would look like and how an inclusive education practice should be shaped. It has been very fuzzy … really, what is an inclusive environment (TCS).

Although the perceptions of inclusive education will be more fully presented later, it was evident that the very idea of inclusive education did not easily correspond to more traditional roles and identities as TSS and TCS. Normative ideals were at times in conflict with personal (pedagogical) knowledge and experience. However, it should be recognized that the interviews were conducted during an early phase of the implementation process. The results are structured around what I call institutional ambivalence reflected in three main themes in the empirical material: introduction and information, cooperation, and inclusion. In the following section, I argue in favour of these categories with the aid of findings from the interviews.

**Information and non-information: Different introduction strategies**

It was apparent that the TCS saw it was important to get to know the new students and be able to understand and respond to special needs among students with ID –
practically, pedagogically and socially. The TCS also arranged reflective teams in order to discuss inclusive education and, collectively, watched and discussed the movie *Ninja Koll*, which is educational material about living with ID. The TSS were introduced in somewhat different ways. The teachers had recurring opportunities to visit the new school in order to plan geographic and social arrangements for ‘their’ students’ arrival. The students with ID visited their new school and received information about practical issues such as the classroom location, time schedules, classes, teachers, and transportation alternatives. An initial dilemma recognised by the TSS and the TCS was the geographic location for the (arriving) students with ID:

We had problems choosing the classrooms . . . because they [students with ID] needed their own cloakroom and they were located on the fringes of the school. I think that was kind of stupid; they should have been more in the centre. But I guess it was based on more practical reasons, the cloakroom, and they also need their own toilets . . . some of them also have diapers. I guess they maybe need their own dressing rooms, but I think it is a shame they are located on the fringes of the school (TCS).

Geographic distance contributed to a differentiated situation that led to several more formal, face-to-face-interactions between students with and without ID. From a professional point of view, the teachers – the TSS and the TCS – primarily met in more formal situations and meetings to address and respond to various dilemmas and issues within the project. This left the TSS and the TCS in an ambivalent position since their scope of action, which opened up collaborative initiatives, also left them alone to decide how individual pedagogical needs should be met and responded to in an inclusive practice. One aspect concerned introducing and providing information to students at the two types of schools about changes following the implementation process. Information – verbal and through various educational materials – was distributed in different forms to students in the special schools and the compulsory school.

Students at the compulsory school received information mainly about ID and the way it shapes the characteristics and needs of the ‘new’ students. Part of this process included opportunities to meet and, together with the TSS, talk with these students. It was also evident that the TCS were ambivalent about labelling – for example, when and how to address the fact that the students from special schools had an ID. Instead, there was a strong emphasis on normality and equality. The following quotes are illustrative:

We informed them [the students at the compulsory school] that new students were going to start here and also informed them about which classrooms they were moving into. We were very careful not to mention anything about special schools . . . I think labelling is very important, I mean what I say and which messages I send [. . .] we decided that we would answer specific questions from our students, but not to tell anything generally about the students who were going to be integrated (TCS).
We are all different, but we wanted to build on equality and what we can do together. I thought that they [students from compulsory school, my comment] really don’t need to know that our students have an ID in order to play together. I thought that maybe I would portray them as stranger than they really are (TSS).

The results show that the students were informed about the implementation process in different ways, although none involved ideological or institutional concepts and ideas. It was a common idea that practical arrangements would be settled once the inclusive practice was implemented. It seems that the students with ID did not receive any substantial information concerning the impending changes. The following quote illustrates the difficulties the students with ID had in understanding the changes in their environment and the challenges for the teachers to explain the idea of inclusive education to the students with ID:

I don’t think they were aware about the project. I mean, the idea is very hard to explain . . . we discussed it and some of us became very worried while others found it very exciting. Some didn’t even care. We didn’t talk much at all about working with the compulsory school. We thought that it would be settled once we got there. […] I mean, a lot of our students have previous experiences of being included, and those experiences have made them kind of sad. I mean, you hesitate if they should be thrown back into those (inclusive) environments again (TSS).

In all, the differences between the TSS and the TCS reflect how different logics underpin the views on relevance and appropriateness in their daily practice (see Greenwood et al. 2010). In addition, the TSS and the TCS, albeit for different reasons, were ambivalent about when, how and to what extent students should be informed about and introduced to the impending implementation. Specifically in relation to the younger students, the teachers hesitated about if and, if so, how to give information about these new students’ ID. This professional ambivalence also indicates widespread ideas that labelling equals stigmatisation. For the TSS and the TCS, this may be challenging because they were expected to implement a new inclusive work model whose very idea requires articulation since disabilities are viewed as resources and democratic ideals such as “a school for all children” are emphasised (also see Ekström 2004; Nilholm et al. 2007). As pointed out by Nilholm (2006), inclusion needs to acknowledge that children are different and that these differences are considered assets rather than liabilities.

**Integration and diversity: Developing inter-professional cooperation**

How to define, coordinate and work together within an inclusive environment was not regulated by the leadership or guided by the principles, leaving the TCS and the TSS in an ambiguous position. The responsibility was vague and unclear which, according to Livesey and Noon (2007), is an obstacle during the implementation of
an inclusive practice. The TSS and the TCS had to address questions about *if* and *how* new norms and values in inclusive education would change their daily practice, as shown in the following quotations:

> The big issue for us all was when and how much we would work together; there was a big question mark . . . It was all very fuzzy; I mean what actually is an inclusive practice? (TCS).

> The students from special schools are very different, and it wasn’t easy to explain these differences to the other teachers [TCS].

> I think that TCS had a mindset that ‘our students’ would be very difficult to work with . . . so we had a lot of discussions about them being different. After some time . . . we thought that we should work more together, such as plan which classes we could arrange together (TSS).

On a general level, this indicates *integrative challenges*, which are efforts to achieve a balance or consensus between the TSS and the TCS. Instead, a differentiated situation was apparent due to the geographic distance, different curriculums and schedules between the two types of schools, and how the work in pedagogical teams was organised. Thus, structural circumstances were obstacles to maintaining flexibility and integrating the students from special schools into the compulsory school classes. Consequently, it complicated the identification and sense of ‘us’ among the TSS and the students from the special school. This kind of discontinuity is illustrated in the following quote:

> One of our students [with ID] has been included in two subjects, but dropped out after a few months. It was problematic to change schedules back and forth, and he couldn’t fix it. He managed the classes, but it was difficult to change back and forth and have different schedules and breaks at different times. For instance, he had maths at the same time as my special class had sports, and he had sports when we had research. Sometimes they had activities during sports classes that he couldn’t participate in. Then he wanted to be in my sports classes, but it was impossible because we had a break at the same time. And when we had a class, he was on a break. It was all very hard for him; it was confusing (TSS).

A structural dilemma which complicated the cooperation between the TSS and the TCS was the arrangement of the pedagogical teams. They were organised according to *grades* (junior, intermediate and upper levels of compulsory school) and *school type* (special school and compulsory school). The ambition to work in an inclusive manner in the teams was confronted by more traditional arrangements based on the grades, school type, and different categories of students. Occasionally, mainly in outdoor activities, these different categories of students worked together. More often, especially in core subjects, they were differentiated based on school type. It could be argued that the work was more oriented to *integration* than *inclusion*. That is, integration is defined as placing students with special education needs in mainstream education settings with some adaptations and resources. Practical concerns include whether individual students can fit in with pre-existing structures
and attitudes. Inclusion, however, is defined differently and based on the idea that all students should be given the possibility to succeed irrespective of their personal characteristics or social background (Göransson, Nilholm and Karlsson 2011). Although TSS and TCS on occasion worked in integrated classes, there was still a separate organisation and institution for the students with ID. In terms of adjustments, there seems to be a one-sided development:

We have more teachers [in the special school] . . . so we were compelled to adapt to this new situation, and participate where it was appropriate, so to speak. That hasn’t really been the case from their side [the compulsory school] . . . We are the ones who have to adapt, it just is . . . we ask ourselves in various situations if it is suitable for our students to participate . . . and it is implied that we may take part in those activities our students can manage. It is not as if any activities have been adjusted to meet our students’ needs (TSS).

It also seems that the competence and experience among the TSS were mainly relied on in a consultative way; the TSS became advisors in relation to individual students or situations. This was also acknowledged by the TCS:

We have been informed about how to relate and respond to pupils with ID. In these kinds of matters, we have had support from TSS . . . what one can expect and what we can do in specific situations (TCS).

Institutional and organisational obstacles to developing an inclusive environment – obstacles that according to the TSS and the TCS upheld differentiated practices – were a lack of time for planning, communication and administration, insufficient social and administrative support and leadership, and inadequate guidelines for collaboration and decision-making:

Since we moved here, there haven’t really been any discussions at all about cooperation. We have no time for these kinds of discussions, and I think it is a matter for the management. There was supposed to be enough time for such discussions. I mean, there is a lot of goodwill and ambition, but not enough time and energy (TSS).

The ability to cooperate in daily practice was also complicated by the way the leadership was organised. It was differentiated between school grades (1–3, 4–6 and 7–9), which involved three principals. Thus, various problems were managed by three people. The TSS and the TCS indicated that this differentiated solution complicated implementation of the inclusive work models. In all, the results point to challenges that need to be surmounted in order to successfully implement an inclusive environment. For instance, research shows that support from managers and leaders through involvement, support and advocacy improves the conditions for a successful implementation, while a lack of support is often perceived as a barrier (Grimshaw et al. 2004). According to Haugaard Jakobsen et al. (2004), time is another important
component for developing inter-professional cooperation. Instead, the TSS and the TCS were left in an ambivalent position and left alone to interpret and exercise ‘inclusion’:

[Interviewer: Can you describe the working methods and approaches to inclusion?] Well, you can say that it has been these more open working methods, where results are not that important (TSS).

In terms of institutional logics, the results demonstrate an apparent dilemma between external expectations connected to developing new pedagogical working models to be successful in terms of inclusive education and to recognise social and environmental concerns in order to meet and respond to students with ID.

**Placement, identity and disability: Inclusive education and ambivalence**

The results of this study indicate an overall positive view of the idea of inclusion, but the informants experienced difficulties implementing these ideas in practice and in determining how to act according to these ideals in day-to-day interactions. Most of the inclusive activities took place during uncoordinated and more loosely organised ‘schedule-breaking’ activities such as music, field days and physical education. The activities offered flexibility and opportunities to work together but, because they were more unregulated, pedagogical support was needed.

The results also show that inclusion was primarily defined in terms of integrative processes; to make administrative adjustments in order to include students with ID in regular classes. Inclusion was chiefly understood as shared spaces and activities and did not involve questions about identities and a sense of belonging. In part, this followed the tendency that inclusive education was socially categorised as ambiguous and delicate, as shown in the following quote:

I can’t really make any sharp distinctions between what is inclusive education and not. It has to do with that you are part of an activity and that you are counted on. It is not easy to say really... it also involves how much the students can manage. Our students [with ID] often have additional perceptual disorders, which means they have difficulties coping and managing in larger groups. They get wandering eyes and, after a while, you can see that it is going downhill. You can see they are not perceptive, and then they have to be in the small group [special classes] to recover. It has to be small doses and appropriate inputs (TSS).

In practical day-to-day situations, these ambiguities seem to have been negotiated between the TSS and the TCS and resulted in what could be described as a consensual ideology governed by primarily practical and social considerations. This was reflected by the understanding that it is easier to succeed with inclusive practices with younger students. The older the students, the greater the challenge. The following
quotes are descriptive and indicate the state of identity politics during the implementation process:

It has been easier for younger students (with ID) to find friends and co-workers (without disabilities) and more difficult for older students... younger students are generally more accepting and have more similarities, while it is harder for older students, teenagers have enough with themselves (TSS).

... It has been difficult for students in the 7th or 8th grade (compulsory school) because they are very identity-seeking. It could be problematic to uphold social relations in general... the dream is that they (students with and without ID) could become friends and get along... but it is very difficult to accomplish... it is quite a big step to have friends in compulsory school, not many pupils with ID fix that (TCS).

This perceived correlation between age and complexity was also directed toward students with ID:

The older students with ID were kind of already a group... once we got here, they haven’t really opened up toward other students... they are quite safe and secure together (TSS).

It is evident that the challenges and problems of working with inclusive education were located within the characteristics of individual students. Differentiated environments and activities were mainly justified through biological differences. On this basis, the results reflect what Clark et al. (1998) and Skidmore (2004) call a medical-psychological perspective in inclusive education. One TSS described the socially constructed ‘inclusion’ as a high-risk activity for students with ID:

If students with ID had been included earlier and had perhaps been feeling quite bad and depressed... it takes at least the entire secondary school (grades 7–9; three years) before we are able to strengthen them again. I think we have been very successful here in our special school, everybody is satisfied. Here, they are safer, have greater confidence and have learned more than they dare to try. They are in a group where they can be who they really are (TSS).

Most, if not all, respondents touched on the dramatic effect of the unsuccessful inclusion of the students with ID, which corresponded with the professional ambivalence and tendency to socially categorise people with ID as fragile and dependent. The following example from one respondent illustrates how professional ambivalence and the desire to reduce stigmatising effects based on ID affected how a certain activity was planned and exercised:

Traditionally, we have been in our auditorium at graduation, and one class at a time sings on stage. But now, after the implementation, we thought it could be stigmatising so we decided that all children up to third grade should perform together, so that everyone gets to participate and sing. But because some verses were difficult to learn for the students from the special school, we decided that only third-grade students from the compulsory school should sing and the rest should be silent... so, well... after all it was very nice (TCS).
Potentially stigmatising effects had a considerable impact on actions among the TCS and perhaps especially the TSS since they were expected to guarantee the safety of the students with ID. In addition to adjustments, this was done mainly in favour of differentiated practices. Small-scale environments were more appropriate for students with ID for them to ‘feel more confident’ and ‘be successful’ in different school assignments. How and to what extent this is being done are questions for more empirical research, but the findings in this study show that the TSS have extensive room for action to define if and when their students should be involved in inclusive activities. A common position among the informants was that students with ID could attend – be integrated into – regular classes ‘if it worked’. Successful implementation depended on the characteristics of the students with ID – their self-concept, age-related social behaviour, and previous experiences of inclusion relations with classmates and teachers.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to describe and analyse the experiences of a policy-driven, top-down-initiated inclusive educational practice in one municipality in northern Sweden. The primary focus was on the attitudes to as well as views and perceptions of inclusive education held by teachers at a compulsory school and a special school. The study has obvious limitations, not the least because of the small number of informants and empirical sample, which makes generalisations to larger populations difficult. Still, I want to argue that some results can be discussed more generally in terms of implications for implementation of inclusive work methods in schools.

Educational policy in Sweden includes important values such as equality and inclusiveness. However, researchers have pointed out that there is still a tendency to individualise problems for some students. Increasingly, more students are labelled as being not in problems but with problems (Nilholm 2012). Individual deficits are more often emphasised before social and organisational obstacles to better understand students with ID in school environments (also see Vehmas 2010; Clark, Dyson and Millward 1998; Skidmore 2004; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn 2013). The results presented in this article provide evidence of this tendency in daily practice. All respondents touched on what I call institutional ambivalence which, was reflected by different categories of teachers and students based on more traditional roles and identities, and separate curriculums and schedules based on different types of schools. The results are similar to those in Norwich’s (2008) study; he concluded that, when pursuing commonality and relevance, teachers tried to find ways to have it both ways as much as possible. However, as the results here also indicate, this balancing act may be ambivalent in whether to recognise, or not recognise, differences since both options have negative risks associated with stigma, or denial of opportunities. The results thus reveal that it is indeed a professional
challenge for teachers to incorporate what is viewed as unusual or different (disability) in the organisation and in ordinary, day-to-day practices (also see McLeskey and Waldron 2007).

Moreover, the results indicate that the twofold authority structure in the project confronted teachers with two different logics. I call them an educational logic and a social logic. Since logics establish a framework within which knowledge claims are situated and underpin the appropriateness in an organisation (Scott 1994; Greenwood et al. 2010), the teachers had to comply with different expectations. The educational logic is formal/ideological and characterised by values connected to ideological ideals such as normality, equality and inclusion. The social logic is not informal but vague and more pragmatic; differentiation and disability were predominant dimensions. This duality influenced the collaboration during the implementation process by creating an ambivalent view of students with ID (skills, abilities and competencies) and appropriate inclusive work methods (when, how, with which consequences). It also involved hesitation about how concepts, norms and values should be operationalised in day-to-day work. This may be viewed as a result of the influence of the institutional context, in which ideological, legal and moral issues stipulate expected activities and orientations. However, in daily practice external expectations are often confronted with more informal and pragmatic situations where teachers have to respond to individual needs. This involves a formal/informal dichotomy, which further strengthened the ambivalence expressed by the teachers. The TSS and the TCS were, at the same time, administrators of social order (formal policy) and expected to be flexible and use their scope of action to meet and respond to individual needs and preferences (informal support). This corresponds with Czarniawska-Joerges’ (1992) duality of the “world of ideas” and the “world of practice” in organisations. The project analysed in the article has a similar feature, and covers a two-dimensional gap – time and content. In terms of content, one world contains ideas and the other actions. And in terms of time, the world of ideas focuses on the future, while the world of practice deals with activities in the present. In this article, the world of practice in inclusive education is characterised by the norms and values of ‘ordinary practice’ – this corresponds to education logic – while the world of ideas is dominated by prevailing norms and values in society, such as inclusion and equality – which corresponds to social logic. Thus, in order to successfully implement inclusive practices, the collaborating actors as well as the leaders require knowledge of organisational analysis. What is perceived as quality or performance in the ideological framework of inclusive education cannot be reduced to adjustments and integrated practices ‘when it works’ but must also acknowledge the organisational and structural premises. This includes the way teachers, administrators and leaders respond to the external pressure put on schools since such important external actors formulate expectations for organisational performance – for example, to be
inclusive. As pointed out by institutional theorists (see Scott 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991), this is important because a good reputation is important as it provides the basis for friendly behaviour and external legitimation. This is a prerequisite for legitimacy and survival (such as in the project). Consequently, the TSS and the TCS must uphold a dual legitimacy, turning one face inward (appropriateness according to norms and values) and another outward (institutionalised expectations in the environment) (also see Ineland, Molin and Sauer 2014).

Considering the three stages through which effective changes in education progress presented by Fullan (1991), some conclusions may be drawn based on the results shown in the article. In the initiation stage, the TSS and the TCS were prepared through meetings in reflective teams and lectures and movies on ID. However, all respondents touched on the lack of time and guidelines for how to develop inclusive work methods. The implementation stage indicates what is also pointed out by Fullan (1991) – that since preparation was undertaken during the first stage, everything in this stage would naturally fall into place. During the data collection period, this had proved not to be the case. Instead, the TCS and the TSS were given a significant scope within which to act and decide on various matters. Some experiences which, upheld differentiated practices between the special school and the compulsory school were a lack of time for planning, communication and administration, insufficient social and administrative support and leadership, and inadequate guidelines for collaboration and decision-making. This is interesting considering that comprehensive research has shown that support from managers and leaders through involvement, support and advocacy improves the conditions for successful implementation, while a lack of support and resources such as time are barriers (Grimshaw et al. 2004; Haugaard Jakobsen et al. 2004). The last stage in Fullan’s model, institutionalisation, is when the initial idea – for example, inclusive work methods – becomes an established part of practice. Commenting on this stage would require more empirical research that follows the future development. However, the results indicate that the project has opportunities for and threats to institutionalisation, where the former concerns collaborative work initiatives and the latter that teachers are striving to have it both ways as far as possible, which risks maintaining separate curriculums, schedules, or categories of teachers based on different school forms. One dilemma, was whether or not to recognise differences in terms of intellectual disabilities since both options may have negative implications for identification (integration, differentiation), curriculum (relevance and risks with a common curriculum), and placement (relevance and risks with ordinary classes).

To sum up, I argue that the institutional context is important to acknowledge and consider in further empirical research on implementation processes in inclusive education, not least when considering the ethical implications. It answers questions about how teachers as well as school organisations deal with the risk of being stigmatising – through labelling, differentiation and compensatory arrangements –
without failing to address and respond to the fact that some individuals have, and always will have, special needs due to their ID. I believe that the article’s implications also hold the potential to emphasise critical aspects of how professionals in such organisations respond to the inherent conflict between conformity and individual authority – between normative assumptions of what is considered normal (e.g., inclusion) and the possibilities for people/students with ID to articulate individual identities and life projects inside and outside of school environments. As pointed out by Peters and Reid (2006), the call for new discursive practices in school environments that challenge the normality/deviance discourse is related to what I have labelled social and educational logic. Inclusive education has opened up to such new discursive practices and has the potential to create stimulating learning environments for all students, develop cooperation opportunities between different categories of teachers, and increase pedagogical awareness. Yet, the project analysed in this article, although in an early stage of the implementation process, did not significantly restructure the school organisation toward more inclusive work methods. In this respect, the article adds to the discussion of challenges – administrative, organisational, practical – in implementing new discursive practices within inclusive education since norms and values, routines and rituals are not easily changed, regardless of political rhetoric.

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