



Research about inclusive education in 2020 – How can we improve our theories in order to change practice?

Claes Nilholm

To cite this article: Claes Nilholm (2021) Research about inclusive education in 2020 – How can we improve our theories in order to change practice?, European Journal of Special Needs Education, 36:3, 358-370, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2020.1754547](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1754547)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1754547>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 19 Apr 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 122101



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 44 [View citing articles](#)

ARTICLE



Research about inclusive education in 2020 – How can we improve our theories in order to change practice?

Claes Nilholm 

The institution of Educational Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Since the Salamanca Statement was published in 1994 a massive amount of research has addressed the issue of inclusive education. Yet, there is a sense of lack of progress which seems to necessitate a critical look at the field while not neglecting advancements made. Such advancements concern the development of theory, a concept which is given a broad interpretation in the paper. Both theories with limited scope and more encompassing theories have been developed. However, from the point of view of Lewin's well-known formulation 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory' there seems to be a lack of theories that have empirically been shown to be successful tools in the development of more inclusive school systems, schools and classrooms. The case study seems to be a methodological approach well suited for the development of such theories. Two examples from Sweden, one from the school level and one from the classroom level, are used to illustrate the potential of case-studies to develop theory in this area of research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 January 2020
Accepted 7 April 2020

KEYWORDS

Inclusive education; theory;
case-study; review;
methodology; special needs

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) has been identified as the international breakthrough for inclusive education (Vislie 2003). Special needs education was to be replaced by inclusive education, that is, segregated educational solutions were to be avoided, and the mainstream classroom should open up to diversity. In an early positional article by Farrell (2000; for a pre-Salamanca analysis of the field, see Hegarty 1993), some problems with inclusive education were identified: the lack of knowledge of how to actually create classrooms that were truly inclusive, the persistence of segregated educational practices, and the diverse opinions among teachers and parents about its appropriateness, for example. In a recent theme number of the International Journal of Inclusive Education (nr 7–8, 2019), it appears that these problems are still with us to a large extent. The lack of knowledge concerning how to create inclusive classrooms involving all pupils has also been pointed out in a recent review (Göransson and Nilholm 2014). Further, several authors in the theme number point out that knowledge is still lacking regarding whether school systems actually are becoming more inclusive, and there are still diverse opinions among parents and teachers about the suitability of inclusive education (see De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2010, 2011) for reviews). Consequently, there seems to be a need to analyse

CONTACT Claes Nilholm  claes.nilholm@edu.uu.se
blog in Swedish: <https://mp.uu.se/web/claes-nilholms-blog>

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

in depth why too little advancement has been made when it comes to the development of inclusive practices.

The analysis of the field and suggestions for future research in this positional article is primarily based on (a) a review of influential articles in inclusive education research (Nilholm and Göransson 2017); (b) an overview (Nilholm submitted) of influential reviews in five leading special needs journals (European Journal of Special Needs Education, Exceptional Children, Journal of Remedial and Special Education, International Journal of Inclusive Education, and The Journal of Special Education); and (c) theoretical readings and prior theoretical analyses by the author (Nilholm 2006) building primarily on the work by Dyson and collaborators (e.g. Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Dyson and Millward 2000). The purpose of the paper is to make a theoretical and methodological contribution to the research field. It will be argued that in order to change educational practices in more inclusive ways, partly new theories have to be developed and that case-studies seem to be a promising methodological tool to develop and test the potential of such theories. A central point of departure is Lewin's (1951) belief that good theories are practical. Thus, how can we develop theories that are practical in the sense of helping to develop more inclusive practices? As is well known, the concept 'theory' can be defined in quite diverse ways. In the present paper a wide definition will be used where theory is defined as attempts to explain issues of relevance to a research field, in this instance inclusive education.

Theories of limited scope

It should be noted that a lot of knowledge has been created in the field, as reflected in a multitude of reviews dealing with various aspects of inclusive education, such as *views on inclusive education* (e.g. Scruggs and Mastropieri 1996; Avramidis and Norwich 2002; De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2010, 2011; Scruggs and Mastropieri 1996); *the effectiveness of inclusive education* (e.g. Hegarty 1993; Hunt and Goetz 1997; Manset and Semmel 1997; Freeman and Alkin 2000; Zigmond 2003; Lindsay 2007; Canadian Council on Learning 2009; Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski 2017); *inclusion in specific subjects* (e.g. Block and Obrusnikova 2007); *the inclusion of specific groups of pupils* (e.g. Scott, Vitale, and Masten 1998; Harrower and Dunlap 2001; Brørup Dyssegaard and Søgaard Larsen 2013); and *social aspects of inclusion* (e.g. Nakken and Pijl 2002; Bossaert et al. 2011). We know that different groups such as parents and teachers have varied views on inclusive education, that teachers might be more sceptical than previously believed (De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2011), and that effectiveness studies can be questioned on methodological grounds but report few negative effects of inclusion on either special needs pupils or their classmates (Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski 2017). The studies about effectiveness and attitudes have been important, of course, but their strength in handling general and important issues is also their weakness. The endeavour to generalise across contexts tends to make the contexts of the original studies almost invisible. Thus, studies from different countries with different educational systems and cultural underpinnings are treated as being about the same 'thing', without the consideration that this 'thing' will mean different – and sometimes substantially different – things in these contexts. Thus, the theories that emerge concerning views on inclusive education, its effectiveness and so

on provides some but too little guidance concerning how more inclusive practices can be developed.

There are important findings concerning how pupils with difficulties can be included in mainstream classrooms, but the studies are still often framed within a special needs perspective in their focus on pupils with disabilities or with special needs. There is a lack of studies that show in a methodologically convincing way how inclusive environments involving all pupils can be formed in practice (Göransson and Nilholm 2014). The need for such studies is important for two reasons. Firstly, the whole notion of inclusion is about changing practices. Secondly, providing evidence that inclusive practices can be established is probably the best argument for an inclusive school system. Thus, the time seems more ripe than ever to let theoretical arguments be examined for their potential to change practice. It should be noted, though, that there are reviews that have strived to integrate studies that focus more directly on the issue of how more inclusive environments involving all pupils can be built. Dyson, Howes, and Roberts (2002) carried out a systematic review that focused on studies of how school-level actions could contribute to more inclusive environments; however, the authors found only a few studies that met the less demanding criterion that the studies should indicate a relationship between school-level actions and more inclusive environments. Moreover, Göransson and Nilholm (2014; see also Dyson 2014) question whether such links were reliably established in those studies.

Co-teaching has been suggested as a within-classroom educational approach to create more inclusive classrooms. Scruggs, Matropieri, and McDuffie (2007) made a review of qualitative research about co-teaching, reaching several interesting conclusions. Most importantly, co-teaching seemed mainly to involve moving special needs education into the classroom without changing the basic structure of the learning environment and seemed to have unclear outcomes (also see Paulsrud and Nilholm submitted). In a similar vein, after performing a meta-analysis of co-teaching, Murawski and Swanson (2001) asked: 'Where are the data?'. To conclude, while several knowledge contributions have been made in research about inclusive education, there is still a lack of theories about how to make schools and classrooms inclusive when inclusion is understood as involving all pupils.

The research described above generates some theories (about relationships between variables), of course, but these theories are limited in two senses of the word. Firstly, they are too general (decontextualised) and, secondly, too framed within a special needs perspective that is not concerned with the whole school environment but that focus on special needs only.

Elaborated theory

Whereas, research about, for example, the attitudes to and effectiveness of inclusive education has been largely concerned with relationships between variables, there is a lot of research into inclusive education that has been grounded in very elaborated theories (cf. e.g. Allan 2008). Skrtic (1991, 1995) is an example of an early theorist who has been influential. Skrtic's endeavour will be discussed as one example of a general shortcoming as regards the development of elaborated theories about inclusive education, i.e. that such theories have not convincingly shown their potential to change practices into a inclusive direction. Skrtic's point of departure is critical pragmatism. He deconstructs special education in order to construct inclusive education. More

specifically, he deconstructs the basic premises of special education, i.e. that pupils can be categorised into different deficit groups and that special education is a rational response to the needs of those groups. The normal/special distinction is, according to Skrtic, upheld by several mechanisms, the most important ones being the professional division of labour between regular teachers and special educators and the 'machine bureaucracy' of educational administration. This bureaucracy forces schools to account for their work in specific ways that are not beneficial to the development of inclusive education. Skrtic argues that, instead, schools should be problem-solving entities organised according to the challenges at hand. By reflective problem-solving, teachers will create more inclusive schools. While of significant value, Skrtic's reasoning has one shortcoming of importance to the argument in this paper which is the fact that he solves problems in theory while leaving practice untouched (see Dyson and Millward 2000). Skrtic is not alone in his endeavour and should as has been said be read as one example of this type of shortcoming. As pointed out by Clark, Dyson, and Millward (1998), there have been several attempts to deconstruct traditional special needs education by pointing to its irrationality and/or its immorality. Thus, according to these authors, discourses, professional interests, social structural factors, and the failure of schools have been pointed to as reasons that special educational practices still exist. In other words, different discourses, professional interests, social structures, and/or schools would be more inclusive (Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998). Nevertheless, the construction of inclusive practices becomes, as for Skrtic, a theoretical pursuit. This phenomenon of elaborated theory which is not examined with regard to its potential to change practice is a recurring phenomenon in research about inclusive education. Yet, the theoretical research has made us aware of several important issues, such as the role of professional groups, the workings of educational systems, and the function of labelling/diagnoses. The point in this article is not to argue that such theorising could not be interesting in its own right, yet its usefulness in contributing to the development of more inclusive practices has to be examined with regard to practice.

To sum up this far: On the one hand, we have theories of limited scope that have provided some important knowledge but that are decontextualised and framed within a more traditional special needs perspective, thus failing to yield convincing evidence of how more inclusive environments involving all pupils can be established. On the other hand, we have theoretical research that is too decontextualised from actual practices. In the remainder of this paper, it is argued that research about inclusion has to be contextualised in order to be able to further the development of more inclusive practices. The case study, it will be argued, is particularly suited to examine the potential of theories to contribute to more inclusive practices. Lewin's (1951) conviction that the most practical thing is a good theory is one point of departure for this paper. It should also be pointed out there are several other theorists that have been arguing in a similar vein, e.g. Dewey (1916; cf Biesta & Burbules, 2003) whose concept of transaction points out the importance to put theory into practice.

Before turning to the issue about how case studies that integrate theory and practice can be designed, it is important to discuss what is meant by inclusion. To put it differently, if we need theories to develop inclusive practices we must have a clear conception of what these theories should help us to achieve.

Defining inclusion

It is often pointed out that inclusion has been given diverse meanings (e.g. Barton 1997; Slee 2011; also see Lindqvist and Nilholm 2014; Magnusson 2019). In two recent reviews (Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Nilholm and Göransson 2017) four diverse uses of the term inclusion were discerned in high-impact research. A placement definition implies, as does its forerunner, mainstreaming, that inclusion denotes the place of education. The second use involves, in addition to placement, the requirement that the social and academic needs of pupils with disabilities or in need of special support are met. The third definition reflects the second but concerns *all* pupils. The fourth definition, finally, involves the creation of communities in schools. How important, then, is the meaning of a word? If we are striving for more inclusive practices it is of course essential to define what such practices would look like. It should be noted that the use of the placement definition seems to be most common and that under this definition whether inclusion is worth striving for or not becomes largely an empirical question (Nilholm and Göransson 2017). On the other hand, there are more radical researchers whose vision is a new form of schooling that strives for community and cooperation across different diversities. To put it slightly differently: On the one hand, the word inclusion has been added to a traditional special needs discourse. Pupils are identified to a large extent by their shortcomings, and the traditional distinctions between normality and deviance are upheld in terms of professional groups and in the wider organisation of education. This is where we can locate most of present day research about inclusive education. On the other hand, several researchers have used the word inclusion in order to challenge traditional educational structures. The point here, given that this is a forward-oriented positional paper, is not to delineate all available positions in the field but to point out the necessity for researchers to be clear about issues like this and to clarify what notion of inclusion that guides this paper. Or to put it slightly differently, the type of inclusion that we need new theories in order to approach. The development of education is not an objective enterprise but is situated in democracy (cf Booth 1996; Nilholm 2006; Lindsay 2007) and tied to certain values (cf Connolley and Hausstätter 2009). Since the different definitions of inclusion express different values, it becomes extremely important to be clear about such values in research. The notion of inclusion that informs the present paper is that inclusion involves all pupils, i.e. inclusion means that all pupils should be participating socially and learn according to their prerequisites. Ideally, this would also involve the creation of communities in schools and classroom. Thus, the point being made in the present paper is that we need theories on how this is to be achieved in practice.

The case study approach

If we believe inclusive education as defined above to be a just way to organise schooling, we want to create more inclusive schooling at the system, school, and classroom levels. In the following, the case-study approach will be discussed in relation to the system, school, and classroom levels. The case study approach makes it possible to a) combine different levels of analysis b) take complexity into account c) preserve the integrity (wholeness) of the phenomena studied and d) is particularly suited for development of theory (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2009; cf. Rule and Vaughn Mitchell 2015). The case-study approach thus seems

particularly suited for testing and developing theories about how to develop more inclusive practices since it a) avoids the pitfalls of theories of limited scope since theories about cases have to combine different levels of analysis, take complexity into account and preserve the integrity of the phenomena studied and b) also includes the actual exploration of the usefulness of elaborated theories. This connects to the main argument against elaborated theories, i.e. that while such theories often combine different levels of analysis, take complexity into account and (at least theoretically) preserve the integrity of the phenomena, they are seldom examined systematically in their capacity to create more inclusive practices. Thus, to again speak with Lewin (1951) we now too little about their potential to actually change practices into a more inclusive direction.

The analysis of inclusive education at the system level is important in its own right but also as a background to case-studies at the school and classroom levels. In studying inclusive education at the system level, a case-study approach is often used as in the genre of 'country-studies' (such as 'inclusive education in x ' where x is a particular country). In such case-studies a series of questions should be asked: What are the goals of schooling in this particular country? How does the concept of inclusion relate to the educational policy of the country? Does the financing of education contribute to inclusiveness? What discourses dominate discussions about schooling? How is the system organised? What role does the normal/special distinction play in the system? These are some examples of the many questions that researchers should attend to when researching inclusive education at the system level. Too often it is stated in research articles that inclusion is the policy of a particular context, but upon closer examination this issue becomes much more complicated (cf e.g. Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011, for a more critical approach, which could be developed further). On the other hand, it should be pointed out that there are attempts to develop concepts that can be used to more systematically in order to address the issue of inclusiveness at the system level and whether a particular system is developing in an inclusive direction (Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011; also see Loreman 2014 for a methodological discussion). It is also important to note that one central aspect of inclusiveness at the system level that is hardly ever recognised is how diversity in a given society is distributed across schools and classrooms. Do pupils with similar socioeconomic backgrounds seem to be placed in the same classrooms? Are pupils with disabilities evenly distributed across schools and classrooms? These are two examples of questions that we must attend to when studying inclusion at the system level. An additional factor of importance is the role the social and educational backgrounds of the pupils play as regards e.g. educational attainment.

To say the least, studies of inclusive education at the system level can be substantially developed. One particular point that has to be developed given the focus of the present paper is how we are to develop theories about how school system can become more inclusive. It was argued that case-studies have the potential to combine different levels of analysis, take complexity into account and to be particularly well-suited for theory development. Thus, it seems that case-studies are particularly apt in the study of school systems. In such studies, it should be much more common than today to explicitly state our theories of such systems and how they change which thus can be evaluated in light of the case. Moreover, such analysis of cases should be compared to other cases (Rule and Vaughn Mitchell 2015) in trying to disentangle contexts and processes that seem important as regards the development of more inclusive practices in order to develop theory. In

identifying factors of importance longitudinal case-studies are beneficial since they provide better opportunities to study change and thus to identify factors important for change to occur (see below).

As has been said, such studies are important in their own right, but analyses of the system level is also important as a context for studies of schools and classrooms. Thus, it is necessary to analyse the policy, the organisation and financing of the school system, teacher education, laws and regulations, and prevailing cultural ideologies in order to understand both the system in itself and the system as a context for more concrete studies.

Given the complexity, yet wholeness, of national school systems, schools, and classrooms, it has been argued that the case-study approach seems particularly apt to take such complexity and wholeness into account and should be central in research about inclusive education. This is not to say that there should not be room for other types of research, but I want to argue that case studies are urgently needed in order to move theories in the field forward. As stated earlier, it seems that the field is stuck to a certain degree with issues similar to those, for example, discussed by Farrell (2000) nearly 20 years ago. It should be noted that the Salamanca Statement itself recognises a range of factors at different levels – such as an inclusive policy, visions, leadership, support systems, and so on – that will give rise to inclusive practices (UNESCO 1994). Lists of such factors are very common in the literature concerning inclusive education, yet research is needed in order to validate the importance of different factors, their internal relations, and how they are played out in concrete circumstances. To put it differently, theories have to be developed about the importance of different factors and their relations and such theories have to be examined in their capacity to actually change practices.

Case studies of schools and classrooms

In order to illustrate in detail the argument put forward in this article, i.e. that we should strive to develop theories that can make practices more inclusive given an explicit definition of inclusion, I will use two case-studies from Sweden. These are chosen because they are important studies, nevertheless I will also point out shortcomings in the studies in light of the argument put forward in this paper. My focus will be on how the studies potential for theory development is utilised and how it could be developed. While both examples are from change initiated by practitioners, the logic of the argument is also applicable for research-initiated interventional studies.

Change towards more inclusive practices that are accomplished by schools and teachers themselves seems very important to study. In those cases, theory is not removed from practice but is a part of practice itself. More specifically, in order to realise such change, the professionals involved will have to have a concept of what inclusion amounts to and functional theories about how it is to be achieved. When researchers are studying such practitioner initiated change the researchers themselves have and try to develop theories about how the change towards more inclusive practices can be accomplished. I will thus briefly describe two case-studies – one at the school level and one at the classroom level – that I believe are promising attempts to yield knowledge about inclusion that is firmly grounded in practice (Allan 2010). Nevertheless, I believe that these case studies would have benefitted further by taking some of the points made in this paper into account, which I will illustrate.

A case study at the school level – raising achievement through inclusion

In Essunga municipality in Sweden, there is only one lower secondary school, the Nossebro school. When statistics in Sweden on school achievement were officially available in Sweden in 2007, it turned out that Essunga was one of the lowest-performing municipalities in terms of making pupils eligible for upper secondary education. Somewhat of a shock wave went through the municipality, and there was an opening for change. The people in charge of the school were told by local school politicians that they were free to make the necessary changes as long as it did not cost extra money. Several changes were made, and within a few years the Nossebro school turned out to be one of the most successful in the country. The community received visits from almost all the municipalities in Sweden and was considered a good example by Swedish school authorities and politicians. The researchers Bengt and Elisabeth Persson documented the school change (Persson and Persson 2012; Persson 2013) through interviews, observations, and the analysis of documents. The researchers further provided a thorough description and analysis of the study's policy context, which was changing in Sweden at the time of the study.

Several changes were made in the school, after which the school was described as being characterised by the following: authoritative leadership characterised by warmth and support; the use of research to develop teaching; distinct leadership in the classroom; structure and clarity in the teaching; effective use of teaching time, signalling to the pupils that school work is important; individually suited adaptations; homework assistance and holiday schooling; extra support provided in the classroom; co-teaching in core subjects; high expectations; a focus on knowledge; a focus on positive issues and ignoring negative behaviour; varied work forms where pupils are not left alone, as in individual work; and listening to pupil's opinions on planning and engagement (Persson and Persson 2012). Persson (2013) suggests that the changes at the school could be characterised as a change in thought style. Yet it is hard to understand more exactly how these different factors interacted. To put it otherwise, the data is not used in their full potential to develop an explicit theoretical model of how the change was accomplished.

It is further not wholly clear how it was established that the studied environment was inclusive since only a smaller group of children were interviewed (Persson and Persson 2012; Allan and Persson 2016). If inclusion is meant to encompass all pupils, more data are needed in order to substantiate the inclusiveness of the environment (see Florian 2014 for an interesting discussion of how to find evidence of inclusion; see also Nilholm and Göransson, 2014). To conclude, the study of Essunga is important in several ways. Firstly, the choice of making a case study of this exceptional case was very well-founded. Secondly, the case-study was situated in the national policy context. Thirdly, a lot of factors important to the change were identified. Fourthly, some interesting theoretical concepts were used to account for the findings. Nevertheless, it seems that the case could have been used further to develop theory both within the study and also in comparing it to other cases and to elaborated theories of inclusive education. The theory could further have been developed by studying what happened in Essunga later. As shown by Swedish official statistics (SNAE, 2020) the results of the school subsequently declined and in 2014 the school appeared to be an average Swedish school as regards learning and social aspects. Studying what appears to be a development away from

inclusion could have casted light on factors that sustain or work against inclusion. This connects to what was said in relation to studies at the system level, i.e. the usefulness of longitudinal data. It would also have been illuminating to discuss the theories of the researchers in relation to theories of the practitioners involved.

A case study at the classroom level – building community

This example of a case study is originally described in Nilholm and Alm (2010). The case study was conducted in a classroom in grades 5 and 6 involving 15 pupils and 2 teachers. Four of the pupils had a neuropsychiatric diagnosis, and an additional pupil had been judged to be on the borderline for entering the special programme for pupils with intellectual disabilities. A pilot-study had indicated that the classroom seemed inclusive, but the inclusiveness of the classroom was something that was investigated in the study. More specifically, inclusion was defined in terms of three criteria: (1) difference was to be accepted, (2) pupils should be participating socially, and (3) pupils should be participating educationally. Interviews, questionnaires, sociograms, poems from the pupils, and, to a lesser extent, participant observation were used to determine the inclusiveness of the classroom in terms of the three criteria. This part of the analysis indicated quite clearly that the classroom seemed to be an inclusive environment. In fact, there was data to indicate that the classroom qualified for the fourth definition of inclusion as including the construction of a community. Having established this, an analysis of the teachers' strategies was made, and several strategies were discerned.

As with the study in Essunga, this study also was important in several ways. Firstly, it is one of few empirical studies of classrooms that has taken its point of departure in an explicit definition of inclusion. Secondly, the choice of the case is well-founded. Thirdly, several teacher strategies are identified that seem to be important to create inclusive classrooms. Nevertheless, given the argument of the present paper we can also identify several ways in which the study could have been strengthened in order to further increase our knowledge of how to develop more inclusive practices. The case-study could have been more clearly situated in the Swedish policy context. Moreover, the data could have been used to develop a more explicit theory of how inclusiveness could be achieved. The researchers are to a certain extent also caught in what could be labelled the 'list-trap', i.e. the identification of lists of factors that seem to be important in order to create inclusive environments without working out the relations between such factors in a theoretical model. The authors of the article do neither take their point of departure in a theory about how inclusive classrooms are created, nor relate their findings to other case studies or to elaborated theories about how inclusion is to be achieved. Thus, while both studies are chosen because they move the field further and are comparatively good studies some of their shortcomings in their capacity to contribute to theory development have been highlighted here in order to illuminate and illustrate the argumentation of the paper.

Summary and conclusion

I have been arguing that research about inclusion indicate that too little progress has been made since the international breakthrough for inclusion with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). Consequently, we need better theories with regard to how

more inclusive practices can be created, especially if we mean that inclusion encompasses all pupils. Prior theorising has been either too restricted or too removed from practices. Often inclusion research has been a disguise for traditional special needs research. The point of departure of the argumentation in this paper has been that it is important to be explicit about what is meant by inclusion and the stand is taken that inclusion involves all pupils and, in some instances at least, the creation of communities in schools and classrooms.

It has been argued that case-studies at the system- school and classroom levels are especially beneficial in developing theories about how practices can become more inclusive in this sense. Case studies are particularly well-suited because they make it possible to combine different levels of analysis, take complexity into account and preserve the integrity of phenomena. Two case-studies were critically discussed in their capacity to contribute to theory development.

This paper is of course built upon the assumption that inclusion is a complex phenomenon that has to be analysed at several levels. Other researchers sharing this assumption and who believe that case-studies are useful in order to develop theory with regard to how more inclusive practices can be developed should consider the implications of the analysis in this paper. In concluding this paper, I will make these implications more explicit. Thus, it is important as a researcher to make ones theoretical assumptions as explicit as possible in initiating a case-study whether on the system, school or classroom level. Such theoretical assumptions concerns what one believes characterise the studied entities (the system, the school, the classroom) and in what ways they are amenable to change. Such theories can be built from previous research, including more elaborated theorising, and from prior case studies. The case-study itself has to be built on a rich data base including both qualitative and quantitative data and, if possible, be longitudinal. Such research can be either interventional or, as in the case-studies discussed, be studies of what seems to be environments that are moving in an inclusive direction. The crucial point is to be able to use the case study to systematically try out theoretical understandings of the studied contexts and to relate these findings to prior case studies and also to findings from more restricted as well as elaborated theories. Given such an approach, we should not expect to arrive at universally valid theories of how to develop inclusive practices but rather on conclusion of the following type: Given the education system X, a certain configuration of events and actions a, b, c and so on seem to be beneficial in developing more inclusive practices.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the three reviewers whose comments really helped me to improve the paper. The paper is part of the project "Research about teaching – Systematic mapping and analysis of research topographies" financed by the Swedish Research Council, Educational sciences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Claes Nilholm  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8613-906X>

References

- Allan, J. 2008. *Rethinking Inclusive Education – The Philosophers of Difference in Practice*. Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.
- Allan, J. 2010. "Questions of Inclusion in Scotland and Europe." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25 (2): 199–208. doi:[10.1080/08856251003658710](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856251003658710).
- Allan, J., and E. Persson. 2016. "Students' Perspectives on Raising Achievement through Inclusion in Essunga, Sweden." *Educational Review* 68 (1): 82–95. doi:[10.1080/00131911.2015.1058752](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1058752).
- Avramidis, E., and B. Norwich. 2002. "Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusion: A Review of the Literature." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 17 (2): 129–147. doi:[10.1080/08856250210129056](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250210129056).
- Barton, L. 1997. "Inclusive Education: Romantic, Subversive or Realistic?" *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 1 (3): 231–242. doi:[10.1080/1360311970010301](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360311970010301).
- Biesta, G., and N. Burbules. 2003. *Pragmatism and Educational Research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Block, M. E., and I. Obrusnikova. 2007. "Inclusion in Physical Education: A Review of the Literature from 1995–2005." *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 24 (2): 103–124. doi:[10.1123/apaq.24.2.103](https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.24.2.103).
- Booth, T. 1996. "Changing Views of Research on Integration: The Inclusion of Students with 'Special Needs' or Participation for All?" In *Psychology in Practice with Young People, Families and Schools*, edited by A. Sigston, P. Curran, A. Labram, and S. Wolfendale, 181–194. Fulton: London.
- Bossaert, G. H., S. J. Colpin, K. Pilj, and K. Petry. 2011. "Truly Included? A Literature Study Focusing on the Social Dimension of Inclusion in Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17 (1): 66–99.
- Brørup Dyssegaard, C., and M. Sogaard Larsen. 2013. *Evidence on Inclusion*. Copenhagen: Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research, Århus University.
- Canadian Council on Learning. (2009, March). *Does Placement Matter? Comparing the Academic Performance of Students with Special Needs in Inclusive and Separate Settings*. Series: Lessons in Learning <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519296.pdf>
- Clark, C., A. Dyson, and A. Millward. 1998. "Theorizing Special Education: Time to Move On?" In *Theorising Special Education*, edited by C. Clark, A. Dyson, and A. Millward, 156–173. London: Routledge.
- Connolley, S., and R. Haustätter Sarromaa. 2009. "Tocqueville on Democracy and Inclusive Education: A More Ardent and Enduring Love of Equality than of Liberty." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 24 (3): 231–243. doi:[10.1080/08856250903016714](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250903016714).
- De Boer, A., S. J. Pijl, and A. Minnaert. 2010. "Attitudes of Parents Towards Inclusive Education: A Review of the Literature." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25 (2): 165–181. doi:[10.1080/08856251003658694](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856251003658694).
- De Boer, A., S. J. Pijl, and A. Minnaert. 2011. "Regular Primary Schoolteachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education: A Review of the Literature." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15 (3): 331–353. doi:[10.1080/13603110903030089](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089).
- Dewey, J. 1916. "Democracy and Education." In *The Middle Works (1899-1924)*, edited by J. A. Boydston. Vol. 9. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dyson, A. 2014. "A Response to Göransson and Nilholm." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29 (3): 281–282. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2014.933542](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933542).
- Dyson, A., A. Howes, and B. Roberts. 2002. "A Systematic Review of School-Level Actions for Promoting Participation by All Students (Eppi-centre Review, Version 1.1)." In *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education. <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=julcqkP5Q8U%3D&tabid=278&mid=1101>
- Dyson, A. A., and A. Millward. 2000. *Schools and Special Needs. Issues of Innovation and Inclusion*. London: Sage.

- Farrell, P. 2000. "The Impact of Research on Developments in Inclusive Education." *International Journal on Inclusive Education* 4 (2): 153–162. doi:[10.1080/136031100284867](https://doi.org/10.1080/136031100284867).
- Florian, L. 2014. "What Counts as Evidence of Inclusive Education?" *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29 (3): 286–294. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2014.933551](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933551).
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. "Five Misunderstandings about Case-study Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (2): 219–245. doi:[10.1177/1077800405284363](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363).
- Freeman, S., and M. Alkin. 2000. "Academic and Social Attainments of Children with Mental Retardation in General Education and Special Education Settings." *Remedial and Special Education* 21 (1): 3–26. doi:[10.1177/074193250002100102](https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250002100102).
- Göransson, K., and C. Nilholm. 2014. "Conceptual Diversities and Empirical Shortcomings – A Critical Analysis of Research on Inclusive Education." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29 (3): 265–280. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2014.933545](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933545).
- Göransson, K., C. Nilholm, and K. Karlsson. 2011. "Inclusive Education in Sweden? A Critical Analysis." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15 (5): 541–555. doi:[10.1080/13603110903165141](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903165141).
- Harrower, J., and G. Dunlap. 2001. "Including Children with Autism in General Education Classrooms: A Review of Effective Strategies." *Behavior Modification* 25 (5): 762–784. doi:[10.1177/0145445501255006](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445501255006).
- Hegarty, S. 1993. "Reviewing the Literature on Integration." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 8 (3): 190–200. doi:[10.1080/0885625930080302](https://doi.org/10.1080/0885625930080302).
- Hunt, P. P., and L. L. Goetz. 1997. "Research on Inclusive Educational Programs, Practices, and Outcomes for Students with Severe Disabilities." *Journal of Special Education* 31 (1): 3–29. doi:[10.1177/002246699703100102](https://doi.org/10.1177/002246699703100102).
- Lewin, K. 1951. *Field Theory of Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, Edited by D. Cartwright. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lindqvist, G., and C. Nilholm. 2014. "Promoting Inclusion? – 'Inclusive' and Effective Head Teachers' Descriptions of Their Work." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29 (1): 74–110. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2013.849845](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2013.849845).
- Lindsay, G. 2007. "Educational Psychology and the Effectiveness of Inclusive Education/ Mainstreaming." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77 (1): 1–24. doi:[10.1348/000709906X156881](https://doi.org/10.1348/000709906X156881).
- Loireman, T. 2014. "Measuring Inclusive Education Outcomes in Alberta, Canada." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 18 (5): 459–483. doi:[10.1080/13603116.2013.788223](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.788223).
- Magnusson, G. 2019. "An Amalgam of Ideals – Images of Inclusion in the Salamanca Statement." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 23 (7–8): 677–690. doi:[10.1080/13603116.2019.1622805](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622805).
- Manset, G., and M. I. Semmel. 1997. "Are Inclusive Programs for Students with Mild Disabilities Effective? A Comparative Review of Model Programs." *The Journal of Special Education* 31 (2): 155–180. doi:[10.1177/002246699703100201](https://doi.org/10.1177/002246699703100201).
- Murawski, W., and L. Swanson. 2001. "A Meta-Analysis of Co-teaching Research: Where are the Data?" *Remedial and Special Education* 22 (5): 258–267. doi:[10.1177/074193250102200501](https://doi.org/10.1177/074193250102200501).
- Nakken, H., and S. J. Pijl. 2002. "Getting along with Classmates in Regular Schools: A Review of the Effects of Integration on the Development of Social Relationships." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 6 (1): 47–61. doi:[10.1080/13603110110051386](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110110051386).
- Nilholm, C. 2006. "Special Education, Inclusion and Democracy." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 21 (4): 431–445. doi:[10.1080/08856250600957905](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250600957905).
- Nilholm, C. submitted. *An Overview of Influential Reviews in Special Needs/inclusive Education – Salient Topics and Their Contexts*.
- Nilholm, C., and B. Alm. 2010. "An Inclusive Classroom? On Inclusiveness, Teacher Strategies and Children's Experiences." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25 (3): 239–252. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2010.492933](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2010.492933).
- Nilholm, C., and K. Göransson. 2017. "What Is Meant by Inclusion? – An Analysis of High Impact Research in North America and Europe." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 32 (3): 437–451. doi:[10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638).

- Paulsrud, D., and C. Nilholm. [submitted](#). *Teaching for Inclusion: A Review of Research on the Cooperation between Regular Teachers and Special Educators in the Work with Students in Need of Special Support*.
- Persson, B., and E. Persson. 2012. *Inkludering Och Måluppfyllelse – Att Nå Framgång Med Alla Elever [Inclusion and attainment-Promoting Progress for All Pupils]*. Stockholm: Liber.
- Persson, E. 2013. "Raising Achievement through Inclusion." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17 (11): 1205–1220. doi:[10.1080/13603116.2012.745626](#).
- Rule, P., and J. Vaughn Mitchell. 2015. "A Necessary Dialogue: Theory in case Study Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–11. doi:[10.1177/1609406915611575](#).
- Scott, B. J., M. R. Vitale, and W. G. Masten. 1998. "Implementing Instructional Adaptations for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: A Literature Review." *Remedial and Special Education* 19 (2): 106–119. doi:[10.1177/074193259801900205](#).
- Scruggs, T., and M. Mastropieri. 1996. "Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming Inclusion, 1958–1995: A Research Synthesis." *Exceptional Children* 63 (1): 59–74. doi:[10.1177/001440299606300106](#).
- Scruggs, T. E., M. A. Mastropieri, and K. A. McDuffie. 2007. "Co-teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research." *Exceptional Children* 73 (4): 392–416. doi:[10.1177/001440290707300401](#).
- Skrtec, T. 1991. *Behind Special Education*. Denver: Love Publishing Company.
- Skrtec, T. 1995. *Disability and Democracy: Reconstructing (Special) Education for Postmodernity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Slee, R. 2011. *The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.
- SNAE (Swedish National Agency of Education). 2020. "Statistik Över Svensk Skola." [https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/sok-statistik-om-forskola-skola-och-vuxenutbildning?sok=Soka/Statistics of the Swedish School System/](https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/sok-statistik-om-forskola-skola-och-vuxenutbildning?sok=Soka/Statistics%20of%20the%20Swedish%20School%20System/)
- Szumski, G., J. Smogorzewska, and M. Karwowski. 2017. "Academic Achievement of Students without Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Classrooms: A Meta-Analysis." *Educational Research Review* 21: 33–54. doi:[10.1016/j.edurev.2017.02.004](#).
- UNESCO. 1994. *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNES.
- Vislie, L. 2003. "From Integration to Inclusion: Focusing Global Trends and Changes in the Western European Societies." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18 (1): 17–35. doi:[10.1080/0885625082000042294](#).
- Yin, R. K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage.
- Zigmond, N. 2003. "Where Should Students with Disabilities Receive Special Education Services? Is One Place Better than Another?" *Journal of Special Education* 37 (3): 193–199. doi:[10.1177/00224669030370030901](#).