Intentions and flexibility: navigating complex literacy practices in primary education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children develop within a complicated and dynamic textual world. In the primary school classroom, one of the most important tasks for teachers involves the design of learning environments and situations that can support all students’ literacy development. Although the identification of students with weaker skills is relatively well researched, there is a need for deeper understanding of how teachers address the variation of literacy skills within their classrooms. This article focuses attention on teachers’ navigation of complex literacy practices within the primary classroom, which involves supporting the literacy development of children with a variety of needs, abilities and experiences.

Purpose: The study aimed to investigate how primary education teachers and special educational needs teachers described their intentions and ways of designing learning for complex literacy practices in order to sustain a culture of inclusive education design.

Methods: A total of 24 primary education and special educational needs teachers across four schools in two Swedish municipalities participated in focus group discussions. In-depth data analysis was based on design-oriented theory, applying the central concepts of intentions and flexibility to the teachers’ accounts of literacy development.

Findings: According to the analysis, the participating teachers perceived advantages in using multimodal methods, collaborative learning, motivation and joyfulness, as well as learning structures and support. They discussed the challenges around supporting students’ literacy progress, describing their preparedness and the flexibility, or transformation competence (using different teaching resources in different situations at different times) involved in navigating complex literacy practice in the classroom for the benefit of all students.

Conclusions: The study highlights the significance of teachers’ intentions to prevent, identify and remove barriers to students’ literacy development. It suggests that the part played by flexibility in determining solutions to challenges in classroom practice should not be overlooked in relation to supporting students’ literacy learning progress. Implications also include greater recognition of the importance of continuous professional development to support inclusive practice, with opportunities for collegial learning and collaboration.

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Introduction

Children’s literacy development takes place within a multifaceted and fast-evolving textual world. It requires competence to sift through and critically review different types of texts, and to present arguments, listen to others and articulate one’s thoughts (Leijon and Lindstrand 2012; Selander and Kress 2010). In any primary school classroom, a key task for teachers will involve the creation of learning environments and learning situations that can support all students’ literacy development in this general sense (Forsling and Tjernberg 2020). Whilst much research attention has been paid to the identification of students with weaker literacy skills, more needs to be understood about how teachers address the variation of literacy skills within the classroom.

In the present article, we explore this in the context of complex classroom practices. Our starting point is that all classroom practices are fundamentally complex, but that their organisation determines whether that complexity turns into a problem, a challenge or an asset. Whatever the case may be, there is a challenge inherent in handling variation in the classroom in such a way that all students have access to participation and learning. In any classroom, there are students with different abilities, needs and experiences in relation to learning. For example, this may include students with reading and writing difficulties and also exceptionally gifted students, who have their own specific abilities and needs. Furthermore, many teachers work within multilingual learning communities, where the language of instruction is not the same as students’ home language(s), and where students may have different levels of fluency across languages. In addition, teachers often work in classrooms where significant sociocultural differences exist between students’ living situations.

Our study is based on a design-oriented theory approach, which deals with how various resources are used or not used in social practices, in formal as well as informal pedagogical environments (Lund and Hauge 2011). In terms of resources, both material and cultural, common challenges in schools may, for instance, relate to group sizes, absence of relevant material and adequate tools, lack of support for special needs education, and for didactic flexibility among teachers. We are particularly interested in teachers’ intentions and didactic flexibility in relation to literacy development: in other words, the ways in which teachers can design and stage the learning environment and the learning situation for developing literacy skills (Forsling and Tjernberg 2020). Before explaining more about the study, however, we briefly situate our work within literature relevant to the key concepts considered in this paper.

Background

To describe and understand complex literacy practices, the perspective of Critical Literacy (CL) appears particularly helpful (Janks 2010). CL pays attention to the complexity of reading and writing practices in relation to meaning-making. It focuses on, and investigates, practices that support decoding, text use and critical text exploration. From a broader viewpoint, CL emphasises the importance of analysing the social practices in which these acts are a part, with a focus on traditions of literacy teaching, and the various patterns related to reading and writing that are present in different classrooms (Schmidt 2013). Thus, CL may be used as a tool to problematise the practice, and the pedagogical
and cultural learning environment of school (Gee 2004; Kress 2010). Furthermore, Janks (2010) describes written language in terms of four dimensions: domination, access, diversity and design. These four dimensions are intimately connected, overlap with each other and play a necessary part in understanding and realising the extent of what literacy practice involves. The perspective of CL can stimulate and inspire new pedagogical and educational forms of work (Schmidt 2013). We found this interesting in relation to our study, as it helped us to focus on how teachers talk about the importance of children’s participation in different linguistic and social practices, and how children can develop their decoding, meaning-making, functional language use and critical approach in relation to different types of texts (Barton 2007; Kress 2010; Olin-Scheller and Tengberg 2012).

Factors that present barriers to children’s literacy development can be individual and organisational; indeed, underlying conceptions of what learning is perceived to be can profoundly affect the conditions for literacy learning. For example, teaching based on categorical or compensatory perspectives can lead to learning problems tending to be blamed on the child and their (dis)abilities (Aspelin 2013). In contrast, from a relational perspective, the focus is placed, instead, on relationships, communication and interaction. Teaching and learning problems are seen as caused by various phenomena: for instance, as consequences of the design and staging of learning environments and learning situations. Persson (2013) points out that a relational perspective includes an emphasis on the importance of directing all efforts towards the teaching situation as a whole: including the student, the teacher and the learning environment. This perspective promotes inclusion, which has also been noted by Janks (2010), Cummins (2012, 2017) and Florian (2014).

The notion of inclusion has been important in international policy since at least the early 1990s (Ainscow, Slee, and Best 2019). However, the vagueness of the concept itself has contributed to a wide range of different interpretations and definitions within the literature. The vast body of scholarly work exploring inclusion embraces, for example, some research focusing specifically on students with diagnoses and/or physical disabilities, and their situation in the classroom (Mitchell 2008), and other research arguing for the extension of inclusion to encompass additional groups of students (Qvortrup and Qvortrup 2018). The connection between inclusion and special needs education is interpreted in different ways with some researchers, such as Haug (1998) and Skrtic (1991), observing that special needs education, by definition, creates exclusion practices through the categorisation of students with special needs. Inclusive teaching means starting out from a relational perspective, if inclusion is defined in accordance with Howes et al. (2005), as activities are designed in order to create participation and learning opportunities for everyone. In other words, it is not the student who must be adapted to an existing structure, but instead the structure – in this case, the literacy practice – that must be designed and set for the participation and learning of all students (Forsling 2019; Tjernberg and Heimdahl Mattson 2014). This means that barriers to learning are removed and that favourable conditions are created for all students to participate in learning.

Robinson and Carrington (2002) argue that teachers’ professional development in the direction of inclusive education should be characterised by a collegial, continuous and collaborative culture aiming to adapt teaching to all students. In developing inclusive practice, Skrtic (2005) contends that what is termed personalising instruction is
a significant element for all students. A successful approach to the creation of inclusive practices, it is argued, is to encourage teachers to discuss daily professional challenges with a focus on removing barriers to participation, and opportunities for learning together with colleagues and researchers (Howes et al. 2005; Tjernberg and Heimdahl Mattson 2021).

Research suggests that successful literacy education is closely linked to teachers’ awareness and use of activities supporting both the formal and functional aspects of literacy skills, and their ability to balance the two (Cummins 2012; Langer 2004; Moats 2010; Pressley and Allington 2015; Tjernberg 2013). It is, too, a question of being able to use many different tools with an awareness of the consequences of their use. The important role of the teacher includes designing a learning environment and staging learning situations that offer opportunities for participation and learning through preventing, identifying and removing barriers (Forsling 2017; Tjernberg 2013). In teaching situations, educators perceive what abilities students need to develop and relate this to their own ability to meet those needs. This relates to what Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1964) referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

Researchers in the field of literacy highlight the importance of balanced teaching, where learning, through systematic structural instruction, occurs in meaningful contexts (Berge et al. 2019; Cummins and Persad 2014; Rose and Martin 2013). They also place emphasis on the significance of teachers’ knowledge and focus on language development as well as their deliberate meta-linguistic discussions with students (Cummins 2012; Pressley and Allington 2015; Snow and Juel 2007). Balancing form and function requires teachers to have knowledge of linguistic structures and psycho- and sociolinguistic aspects of language use in relation to reading and writing skills. In this context, the need for teachers to know something about students’ expected literacy development at different stages of the learning process is key (Dillon et al. 2011; Moats 2010). Communication and learning are expressed in more forms today than ever before (Åkerfeldt 2014). All students need to develop a range of ways to communicate, and there may be some students who need to develop particular additional or alternative ways of communicating, if, for example, difficulties related to graphic writing impede communication. In such cases, multimodal modes of expression may support this need. Multimodal literacy can be understood as the ability to understand, use and handle different forms of expression in various textual contexts; it also acknowledges students’ previous experiences and competencies. Selander and Kress (2010) point to the importance of using several modes or sign systems in addition to speech and writing in communication. As communication always takes place through different and concurrent sign systems, it can be described as a multimodal literacy event.

Further, important aspects related to successful education include teachers’ ability to handle variation in the classroom and demonstrate knowledge of various materials, methods, and underlying causes of learning difficulties. This involves diagnosis knowledge and a formative approach (Forsling 2017; Tjernberg 2013). According to Timperley (2019), teachers can develop their professionalism, for instance, by studying their own teaching, finding out how far the student has progressed and then developing adequate pedagogical activities. Myrberg and Lange (2006) demonstrate how teachers with
knowledge of children’s language development and relevant current research use a whole repertoire of strategies to avoid failure in relation to children’s reading and writing skills. Researchers (Aagaard and Lund 2013; Blikstad-Balas and Hvistendahl 2013) describe teachers’ flexibility and ability to adapt instruction and methods to children’s needs. Such qualities are indispensable for teachers who have students in need of special literacy support. Flexibility in teaching practice is regarded as crucial, both in relation to individual differences among students and in relation to the differences between various teaching resources (Rose and Meyer 2002).

Perhaps the most important point is that there is no universal solution that fits every individual. Rather, the need or demand for an internalised flexibility, adapted to content in terms of tasks and activities, is emphasised. In Forsling (2017, 191) this flexibility in teaching practice is referred to as ‘transformation competence’ and defined as the ability to use different teaching resources in different situations and at different times. The act of transformation includes the sum of events, changes and actions that constitute a readiness for any challenge. To acquire transformation competence, the didactic flexibility has to be deliberate: an internalised part of the teaching quality. Furthermore, transformation competence includes agency for teachers, as well as students and collective activity: that is, the basic requirements for collaborative learning.

**Purpose**

With the background context above in mind, the research reported in this article sought to investigate how primary education and special needs teachers described their intentions and ways of designing learning environments and learning situations for complex literacy practices, in order to sustain a culture of inclusive education design. Based on this aim, our research questions were as follows: (1) What types of challenges do teachers report that they encounter? (2) What intentions to design literacy practices emerge from teachers’ reflections on their practice? (3) What competences appear to be significant for handling complex literacy practices?

**Methods**

**Ethical considerations**

A board at Karlstad University ethically approved the study, prior to the conducting of it. The participant teachers received oral and written information about the study. They were informed that they could retract their consent at any time without stating a reason. Participants then confirmed their willingness to take part by giving informed written consent. It was made clear that all information obtained in the study would be dealt within a way which prevented unauthorised access and that personal information collected would be treated in accordance with informed consent. Personal information would be stored for a maximum of one year after the publication of the study (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). The participants were further informed that they had a right to access all information and, if necessary, have any inaccuracies corrected free of charge. This also included the right to request erasure or restriction, or object to the handling of personal information. In terms of reporting, information was managed in a way that
prevents the information from being connected to a specific person without supplementary information, under the condition that this supplementary information was stored separately and that adequate technical and organisational measures were taken.

**Data collection**

The study was carried out at four schools (referred to here as schools 1 to 4), across two municipalities in Sweden. From each school, two preschool teachers, three lower primary school teachers and one special needs teacher took part. In Sweden, preschool covers children from the ages of one to five, preschool class from the age of six and primary school from seven to nine years of age. In sum, there were a total of 24 participants in our study and they were teaching children across the age range of six to nine years. The selection of the teacher categories was strategically based on the purpose of the study. Further, school leaders recommended the participating schools as particularly successful regarding literacy development. Specifically, two of the schools (School 1 and School 2) were described as in a leading position regarding students’ goal fulfilment. The other two (School 3 and School 4) were described as below average in terms of students’ goal fulfilment, but had recently shown, according to the school leaders, a significant upturn trend, which was regarded as a sign that the approach practised was having positive effect on students’ learning.

Data were collected through knowledge-seeking dialogues (Kvale and Brinkman 2014) in the form of focus group conversations (Wibeck 2010). The focus group approach was well suited to the study’s purpose, as it allowed data to be collected through group interaction in relation to a predetermined topic. In focus group discussions, the process – i.e. what happens in the conversation, and what emerges in the interaction between the participants – is fundamental (Wibeck 2010). According to Krueger and Casey (2014), establishing an overall picture is the point of the focus group conversation. This facilitated our aim of investigating the views and shared experiences of teachers in relation to aspects of literacy practices and finding out about the general impression in the group. It enabled us to discern how the participants, when talking to each other, created a deeper understanding of the topic under discussion. Importantly, we were aware of the risks posed by the presence of researchers in terms of affecting the conversation: therefore, to minimise this as far as possible, we took on the role of moderators (Krueger and Casey 2014). As moderators, we were facilitating the discussion and encouraging all the members to participate (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009).

Each focus group comprised six teachers and a moderator. The focus group conversations were preceded by visits to the schools and preparatory talks with the teachers concerned. The focus group conversations, which lasted for around one hour each, were carried out at each school after the end of the students’ school day. Focus group conversations in this context might typically begin with the group receiving some form of stimulus material or teaching issues to start the conversation (Wibeck 2010). In the present study, the focus group conversations were conducted as a semi-formal collective activity, in which the participants could raise issues, discuss and reflect upon the intentions of their designs for learning, and thus focus on matters relating to preventing, identifying and removing barriers to literacy development. In the conversation, the teachers shared ideas and suggestions, and referred to how they worked. They discovered
possibilities and developed ideas. The focus group conversations were conducted in Swedish. They were voice-recorded and transcribed in their entirety.

**Data analysis**

To analyse and interpret the findings, a design theories approach was used as a theoretical framework. Design-oriented theories focus on the design of teaching and learning processes. Design for learning makes learning explicit in relation to a context and the conditions created for learning in various environments and situations (Leijon and Lindstrand 2012; Selander and Kress 2010). The conditions can be described as possible relationships between different actors, and between actors and objects. In our study, these opportunities were evident in the teachers’ statements about relations between teachers and students, and between colleagues. Resources are of note in this context. The participants in the study emphasised the importance of working multimodally in order for all students to be included in the literacy practice. Jewitt (2009) highlights the concept of semiotic resources, which can range from the body, gestures and writing on the board in the classroom, through to digital resources in virtual learning environments. Choosing and using the different resources can have a significant influence on interaction, on the collective activity between individuals, between individuals and artefacts, and also on how subject content is constructed. Different resources have different consequences for meaning-making and learning. Selander and Kress (2010) emphasise that even the choice of different forms of expression, or modes, is a way of choosing content, as the form of expression cannot be separated from content. Since communication takes place through different and concurrent sign systems, each meaningful communication is multimodal (Kress 2010).

The issue of meaning-making is linked to teachers’ ability to be flexible in their teaching practice, and to the resources used in different situations, as well as how teachers and students shape the social processes and conditions for learning, by designing and re-designing information in their own meaning-making processes (Elm Fristorp 2012). Indeed, Lund and Hauge (2011) highlight the importance of collective activities and actors’ intentions. In this study, intent is key, as we are interested in participants’ statements regarding their intentions to prevent, identify and remove barriers to students’ literacy development. The intentions behind how learning situations are designed and set up have an impact on learning and meaning-making (Jewitt 2009; Kjällander 2011). This is particularly significant in relation to students in need of special support (Ahlberg 2009).

The analysis of the focus group conversation data transcriptions was carried out at the group level. This involves an awareness of individual contributions to the contribution of the entire group (Parker and Tritter 2006). The initial analysis was undertaken via categorisation of meaning, using a qualitative content analysis approach and identifying themes related to the aim of the research and the research questions (Ryan and Bernard 2003). The data material was inserted, by the researchers, into columns representing the different themes and then discussed. After the first categorisation, a set of new themes emerged from the data. In this phase, additional analyses were performed, with colleagues, during seminars at the university. The final analysis was based on the design-theory concepts of intentions and flexibility.
Findings

The analytical approach outlined above enabled us to address our research questions. The analysis helped us to identify, in the data, the types of challenges that the teachers reported that they encountered, the intentions that emerged from their discussion, and the competences that seemed significant for handling complex literacy practices. We were, thus, able to gain insight into how the teachers described their intentions and ways of designing learning situations for complex literacy practices. Four main themes, covering organisational, technological, special needs and multilingual aspects, emerged from the analysis of the focus group data. In the subsections below, these four themes are explored in a contextualised way, with the teachers’ accounts of challenges presented first (‘Acknowledging challenges’), followed by teachers’ descriptions of how they dealt with complex literacy situations in relation to challenges (‘Managing challenges’). Where relevant to illuminate and illustrate key points, translated and anonymised excerpts from the data have been included. When the teachers in the study described how they navigated the situations with the intent of including every child, the design-oriented concepts intentions and flexibility became relevant tools to analyse their comments. Thus, the teachers’ intentions and their desire for flexibility are visualised in their descriptions of how they designed and went about their teaching practice, how they used different resources in different situations, and how they tried to design the social context to support meaning-making processes and learning.

Navigating complex literacy practices – acknowledging challenges

In the focus group discussions, the teachers talked about the challenges they encountered on a daily basis at work. These included aspects that were perceived as difficult to handle and take action on, such as those related to organisational, technological and special education matters. These are all important areas in relation to successful literacy skills and affect teachers’ work considerably. According to the analysis, the teachers at School 2, and some at School 1, primarily referred to the challenges that students experienced in a complex classroom practice, while the teachers at School 3 and School 4 mainly mentioned the challenges they encountered as teachers. Teachers across all four schools noted organisational challenges in literacy teaching. They felt that insufficient resources affected the teachers’ situations and learning environments, especially in terms of duty allocation, or carrying out teaching in less suitable rooms that could impede effective teaching. The collaboration between the class teacher and the school health and welfare team was emphasised as very important, but uneven allocation of resources in this respect created frustration. Although the teachers said they could identify students in need of support, they observed that resources were so scarce that support tended to be provided too late, which would affect the students’ chances of progressing towards their literacy learning goals. For example, one teacher commented as follows:

Not getting enough resources is the biggest obstacle. I have this student in year two who still can’t read, and we have known this but nothing happened. (School 4)

Technological challenges were also discussed in relation to students’ literacy development, with teachers at School 3 raising the issue the most. Whilst this was often in terms of
teachers’ perceptions of their own digital learning, other factors mentioned included artefacts and tools. The teachers said that they were comfortable with their way of working and saw many advantages with it, but that they were aware of the consequences of relying on technology, given that the allocation, usability and function of digital resources are all important to the teaching of reading and writing:

A further challenge is the technical aspect, if it doesn’t work, it’s over. It’s a bit vulnerable, being dependent on technology, and it requires people who are familiar with this method. (School 3)

Only two of the four schools, School 1 and School 4, commented specifically on challenges related to the area of special needs; this was often in terms of organisational challenges. Comments tended to be connected with issues of resource allocation, or the lack of special needs teachers, especially for students in the early years. One teacher observed as follows:

I have special needs support in my class around 20% of the time. It’s very odd that we work according to the ‘ice-cream cone’ model regarding special education and resource teachers. I would like to see a ‘pyramid model’. If we start building from there [broad base] we can recognise the problems. Now, children slip through the net. (School 4)

The analysis highlighted a familiar concern related to special education, which is that the organisation itself may contribute to the vague demarcation of the special needs teacher’s professional role. Specifically, teachers observed how resource teachers would sometimes take on the tasks of the special needs teacher, with one special needs teacher commenting:

I think that one challenge is that we don’t have a special needs educator with an overarching view of the school. I work closely with the resource teachers, but sometimes I feel a need to consult a special educator. (School 4)

Special education perspectives were further discussed with a focus on cause, effect and measures related to practice. The dilemma was considered in the context of inclusive and exclusive issues:

What is best for the student? Should we work inclusively in the classroom? Should we work one-on-one since there are indications that this is the most effective teaching? But again, we need a balance. A ‘both-and’ perspective is needed. Easy to say and hard to do. (School 1)

Teachers perceived that a lack of special needs expertise in the schools compelled them to ‘think outside the box’ and handle situations themselves to the best of their ability. They described several different ways of removing barriers to literacy skills development, with approaches relating to the management of heterogeneous groups, variation of methods and collaborative learning processes.

Participants had experience of working with children from a range of cultural backgrounds who spoke home languages other than Swedish. In some cases, children whose preferred language was a language other than Swedish made up nearly half of a class, with considerable variation between the Swedish fluency level of these children compared with the children whose home language was Swedish. The teachers explained that vocabulary building was a basic strategy for these children's writing skills development, which is why they worked with this specifically. They
emphasised that they supported students to use words in different ways, also reflect-
ing that, for a deeper understanding of content, students would need to encounter
problems now and again, and be encouraged to overcome them. Indeed, the teachers
saw problem-solving as something that could lead to a positive experience of success,
as evident in this excerpt from the data:

It is not enough with the children hearing and saying, they need to do it. They need to taste
the words, utter the sounds, say the words and write them. And to understand what they are
expected to do. If everything is too easy, without effort, they may not get a deeper under-
standing of what we are doing. (School 2)

Teachers stressed the particular importance of making sure that students with Swedish as
an additional language were encouraged and supported to use many different forms of
expression, such as spoken language, signs, facial expressions and gestures. The objective
was primarily to develop a shared understanding in a supportive context, as suggested
here:

I've noticed a huge difference in just a few weeks. They want to use their language and they
test it. They use gestures and facial expressions. They follow instructions and explanations,
even in maths. So I think it is preventive. And we learn in a context together – as Vygotsky
says. (School 3)

Navigating complex literacy practices – managing challenges

According to the analysis, themes related to teachers’ management of challenges
involved: managing variation (e.g. in students’ abilities and needs), promoting language
development, having knowledge of methods, using multimodal methods and creativity
when encountering complexity, using peer support and collaborative learning processes
as well as collegial learning. Initially, teachers commented that an important factor in
working to overcome barriers to literacy development was possessing a theoretical
understanding of classroom practice, citing several different theorists. The participants
felt that working preventively encompassed approaching ‘children where they are’ and
working together. Further, they considered that preventive measures involved the use of
varying forms of instruction and multimodal methods, models, and approaches to suit
students’ different abilities and needs. When preventive measures did not work, teachers
described how it was necessary, instead, to find methods and tools to remove barriers to
literacy development.

It was clear that participants were aware that many factors needed to interact
together in order to establish teaching that could develop language and knowledge.
One factor noted was teachers’ collegial learning, which meant that the teachers could
develop a common language and talk purposefully about teaching. It was noteworthy
that to overcome some of the organisational challenges, the teachers in the study
turned to each other for support in their literacy education. The collegial learning was
built on organisational need, but revealed itself as an educational, and pedagogical
necessity. The teachers emphasised the value of collegial collaboration, of venturing to
try things out and to share experiences when events did not turn out as expected, and
of conceptualising ‘failures’ as learning opportunities. One teacher explained as follows:

We’ve talked a lot about the generous atmosphere among the students in the classroom, but I would like to add that there’s an open atmosphere among teachers, too. We help and support one another, talking about what went wrong and what went well. This means that we have a more tolerant climate where we dare to challenge ourselves to test new things. (School 2)

The teachers described how they identified students who were at risk of having reading and writing difficulties; they underlined the importance of making observations in practice and working formatively. The teachers believed that vital information would surface in conversation and in practice, and that these were effective ways of discovering students at risk of being left behind. As one teacher put it:

So, there’s a chance that we discover problems very early and that we can support each other in the transition from preschool class to year 1 so we know we can continue helping the children. (School 2)

Despite the technological challenges, the teachers reported how and why they wanted to try to use different tools and modes for literacy education. According to them, multimodal approaches involved students’ collaborative learning, motivation, and a sense of joyfulness – as well as structures, models and support for learning. In addition, the teachers underscored the value of modelling in learning processes. They described how, through modelling, students were never left unsupported and that students who were initially uninterested in writing were drawn into the collaborative learning processes. One example cited was an activity known as book walks, which started with reading and talking about pictures and continued with a deliberate progression to the text level, content, form and function. Participants pointed out that multimodal activities of this nature could be adapted in different ways and required access to teaching material and techniques for implementing balanced writing and reading exercises:

The approach works both analogue and digitally, with pen and paper and with tablets or computers. You can use it in different ways, depending on purpose, task, and student. (School 2)

At School 1, a method that was described as incorporating knowledge somatically, which could be perceived as multisensory as well as multimodal, was used among other approaches:

By adding a movement when practising the sound of letters, I also think that it’s important to use the whole body when working with letters. Seeing, hearing, making is my mantra. (School 1)

The special needs teacher at School 3 commented that, although there was seldom the opportunity to work preventively, when meeting students it was usually possible to prioritise the way that was suited to the individual from a multisensory perspective, explaining ‘I work a lot with practical, aesthetic, and concrete activities, learning through all senses’.

Analysis identified that various kinds of aesthetic expression were used in a range of ways across the schools. These could involve different tools, such as scissors, crayons, pen
and paper, and forms of creative expression including stories, singing, music, images and films. Sometimes the aim was to create art to promote reading and writing:

We practise many things. Using the scissors for cutting. To learn to hold a pen. We draw a lot. We use [plastic fusible] beads and beads on a string. Really, these things should be done a lot more as the fine motor skills will be used in writing. (School 3)

The teachers in the study regarded the use of many different resources, tools and methods as important. In addition, they thought that this also applied to the students who had already acquired many skills, as well as to those who were experiencing some barriers to learning. For example, a preschool class teacher remarked that sign language could be very helpful, especially for communication with children who had recently started at school.

Participants described several different ways of removing barriers to developing literacy skills, including intensive training in phoneme-grapheme correspondence, intensive reading and choral reading, text processing and co-writing. The teachers worked with students who had different family backgrounds, different levels of fluency in Swedish and different experiences. The teachers explained how they read stories to promote language development and literacy, and how the activities of reading stories and practising linguistic forms and functions were considered important:

All children are not read to at home, so this is an important role for us to play in language development. We work with both reading and writing. We read to them every day. Different kinds of books, they get a chance to listen to various types of texts – and we interrupt and explain words, building their vocabulary. (School 2)

The most characteristic approach emerging from the study was for teachers to meet students ‘where they are’ and to vary instruction methods and modalities to suit aims, students and contexts. It was also clear that teachers felt it was crucial to let students be involved in making decisions about their own learning, as one teacher explains here:

You have to be perceptive because all students are different. We have to allow them to participate and have a say. Because we know that the chance to influence one’s situation means a lot in relation to motivation for learning. (School 1)

It was evident from the analysis that the teachers adjusted their instruction in relation to complexity rather than similarity, and provided challenges that could help develop skills. Crucially, the teachers managed heterogeneity in the classroom by obtaining knowledge about and understanding of each child. They adapted their teaching accordingly, so that every student was appropriately challenged in their learning process; as a teacher from School 4 noted, ‘there are the talented students that need to be challenged in other ways’.

The teachers embraced the idea that all students should learn how to succeed, and they worked towards this accordingly. This means that they directed efforts towards developing their knowledge of many methods for learning literacy, applying them to different degrees for different students, changing and testing out new ideas when needed. The four schools used methods, models, and approaches flexibly. These methods, it seems, were combined and used in different ways in accordance with students’ different needs. For example, at School 2, the teachers worked systematically with phonics in the preschool class to make the children conscious of phonemes. They explained that writing skills develop faster when children are aware: ‘Based on sounds, the children write what
they want from the start’. Elsewhere, at School 3, most literacy development was digitally based. The method they employed involved using digital resources actively at an early stage in literacy learning.

Collaborative learning situations and creativity were two aspects that the teachers considered to be important motivations for dealing with complex learning situations. This could mean implementing a variety of approaches in socially constructed contexts, such as book walks, choral reading, image support, modelling and sign support. Both analogue and digital learning resources could be used. The teachers described how the students had a positive effect on each other when they worked together, which could be put to good use in various ways. For instance, one teacher described how boys in one class became more active and stimulated as they were allowed to choose activities based on interest and contribute what they could do best:

We have made fairy tales and films and they were able to choose whom to work with. They made up stories, some writing themselves and others with help, while some drew pictures. Then we recorded their stories and made short films. It was great fun. And the chance to choose activities based on interest was what appealed to the boys. (School 1)

Thus, when students shared their story ideas, they were able to inspire one another and generate new ideas. This teacher also consciously used concepts that encouraged and stimulated rather than inhibited students. Further, a teacher who asked students to ‘tell’ rather than ‘read’ a story to give all students a chance to succeed provided another example:

I usually pause towards the end of the period and say that I’m curious about what you have written, and I walk around and read a bit, you’ve got good ideas, can you tell me about your idea or what you have written? I don’t always say read but tell what you have written. I choose this consciously because I want them to feel that if they find it hard to read exactly what they have written, then they can retell it. And often more and more students want to tell us about their ideas – sharing is valuable. (School 2)

In this way, positive expectations and peer support were used to create a feeling of working towards a shared goal, which, teachers considered, was a good way to help students with low self-esteem feel better about themselves and to create a sense of community:

I think that I always have positive expectations of the children and I think that they feel that too. It’s important that my students feel that we can cope with difficult things, or what they need help with, together. So they don’t feel alone with the problem, but instead feel that together we’ll manage. (School 4)

**Discussion**

The findings from the analysis draw attention to how teachers’ intentions and ways of designing learning environments for complex literacy practices can help sustain a culture of inclusive classroom practice. They also highlight the ways in which teachers’ didactic flexibility, as well as their awareness of their own professional role as collaborative teachers, can enable opportunities for all students to achieve progress in literacy. In the
sections below, we consider the implications of our findings more broadly in the context of other literature, focusing on the key notions of intention and flexibility.

In terms of design theory, it emerged that the teachers’ intentions for the design and staging of learning environments and learning situations were based on the students’ varying needs: in other words, the challenges they experienced. Encountering variation and bridging the gap between students’ abilities in relation to expectations are central to special education (Snow and Juel 2007; Forsling 2017). The teachers were dedicated to students who struggled with reading and writing and were committed to helping them succeed. From an inclusive education perspective, this can be seen as a relational and equality-enhancing approach – an intention to bridge gaps (Aspelin 2013). The teachers’ focus on multimodal flexibility supports that specific special education intention. In practice, it can involve using different approaches, tools and methods that teachers choose for the benefit of a group, a single student or themselves as teachers. Furthermore, the teachers emphasised the importance of collegial conversations as a way of improving their teaching strategies, with the aim of including every student, adapting to every student’s present stage of learning, and challenging and encouraging all students in their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Each instance of meaningful communication is multimodal, according to Kress (2010). Meaning-making is linked to teachers’ ability to be flexible in their teaching practice, and to the resources used in different situations. It is also related to how teachers and students design the social processes and conditions for learning (Elm Fristorp 2012). Forsling (2019) highlights the importance of didactic flexibility, which means that the method itself is not the key to success, but rather it is how the teacher uses the method. Indeed, even evidence-informed methods might not lead to chances of success unless they are implemented with the teachers’ understanding of the underlying processes, as Myrberg (2007) observes. Further, when the teachers described multimodal affordances, it was clear that they perceived learning as a collective activity.

The analysis also indicates that the challenges teachers encounter can lead to professional development, through which they may acquire transformation competence by engaging in collegial learning and further study. It involves flexibility and the ability to see things from different perspectives. Crucially, whilst a general notion of flexibility could be based on intuition, transformation competence is, rather, a sign of a teacher’s conscious and deliberate design for learning. In other words, it is an invitation to adapt to new contexts. Transformation competence includes agency for teachers, as well as students and collective activity: i.e. the basic requirements of collaborative learning.

**Navigating complex literacy practices**

The teachers’ descriptions of how they navigated complex classroom practices include the challenges they experienced, and their efforts to determine pedagogical solutions for the students, and for themselves. It should be noted that, while the teachers were talking about challenges, they were also delivering pedagogical solutions to the problems, which would help them overcome those challenges, within the constraints of their resources at the time. Of course, it must be borne in mind that the participating schools had a reputation for success. From the perspective of CL, the findings point to access and diversity in the teachers’ intentions and in their design of literacy practices. Further, the
issue of power was reflected in discussion about how the teachers interacted with their students, the content of teaching, and the tools used.

Among the challenges mentioned, the teachers at School 3 and School 4 made reference to special education staffing allocation and the teachers at School 1 and School 2 cited digital resources. In all, their comments and observations emphasise the value they saw in having access to qualified special education staff at school: there was a clear feeling that special needs teachers were indispensable in the preschool classroom to help prevent difficulties from the start. It was noteworthy that the teachers remarked that, having identified students who had reading and writing difficulties, a lack of resources tended to stop them from catering fully to all needs. In addition, teachers drew attention to the need to support children whose home language was not Swedish. They highlighted the need for activities to be designed in order to create opportunities for participation and learning for all children. In other words, it is the structure – in this case the literacy practice – that must be designed and set for the participation and learning of all students (Forsling and Tjernberg 2020). The teachers also raised the issue of categorical or compensatory perspectives where learning problems may, instead, be blamed on the child (Aspelin 2013). In these matters, it was evident that the teachers wholly embraced a relational rather than a compensatory perspective. Further, in terms of technology, problems evidently related to lack of access and malfunction, as well as the degree of computer literacy among all teachers, in terms of the potential to use digital teaching resources in a supportive and creative way.

Teachers are by far the most important factor in children’s learning progress (Cummins 2017; Dillon et al. 2011; Pressley and Allington 2015). The characteristics of skilful teachers are that they can combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience and transform them into purposeful pedagogical activities in the classroom, all of which require professional support. According to Timperley (2019), teachers need to develop their professionalism continuously, in order to improve literacy practices that can help enable all students’ participation and learning processes – for instance, by studying their own teaching, finding out about students’ progress and then designing their teaching accordingly. In the focus groups, it was clear that the teachers recognised the importance of having a reference base of theoretical knowledge to underpin their practice. The teachers often referred to research in the interviews, which testifies to their ability to reflect on their own and their colleagues’ pedagogical choices in relation to theory. The analysis of data in this study also demonstrates how the teachers developed a professional meta-language, enabling them to discuss development and learning in a way that allowed meaning to be shared. Several researchers (including Berge et al. 2019; Timperley 2019) highlight the value of a mutual professional language for theorising pedagogical actions.

The teachers in the study described their intentions behind the design and staging of learning environments and situations by emphasising the importance of trusting students’ abilities and supporting them ‘where they are’ in their learning process. Students’ trust in their own abilities grows through formative evaluation, in which the teacher’s positive expectations support their development through challenges and encouragement close to their limits, but still within reach. Cummins (2012) argues that cognitive learning, as well as identity creation, takes place between teacher and student. In relation to this, the teachers made clear the importance they placed on collegial collaboration to develop
teaching. This, however, requires a tolerant workplace climate, where teachers are able to listen to one another, support each other and share teaching ideas.

As mentioned earlier, the teachers in the study worked at schools regarded as successful; further, they were all highly motivated and experienced. The focus group method itself invited the participants to interact with each other, with, for example, one teacher’s comment leading to reflections and new insights for the others. Regarding teachers’ professional development towards inclusive education, Robinson and Carrington (2002) argue that this kind of dialogue has to take place in a culture of collegial and continuous collaboration, which aims to adapt teaching to support all children. Central to the evolution of inclusive education practice is what Skrtic (2005) terms personalising instruction for all students. Howes et al. (2005) argue that a successful path towards this goal is opened up when teachers have the opportunity to discuss daily professional challenges with their colleagues, focusing on removing barriers to participation and learning.

Limitations and further research

Generalisation is not intended from this small, qualitative piece of research. Rather, the strength of the study lies in the insights gained from the in-depth analysis of rich data. The findings will be of interest to educators in other settings who are engaged in furthering inclusive practice in literacy and other related areas, as the study sought to contribute to better understanding how all children included in complex classroom practices can be provided with opportunities to develop their literacy skills.

As noted earlier, a significant shift of perspective in literacy research and in classroom practice (Andersson, Holmberg, Lyngfelt, Nordenstam and Wide 2014; Florian 2021) has involved an attitude change in terms of complexity in the classroom, from regarding diversity as a ‘problem’ for special needs education to, instead, taking advantage of diversity as a resource. Therefore, a continuing research focus on the design and staging of literacy practices intended to create favourable conditions for the participation and learning of all students (Howes et al. 2005; Janks 2010) is vital. It follows that larger scale studies concentrating on the shift towards inclusive teaching could be very valuable in the context of supporting practice in sustainable ways. Another related area for future research would be praxis-oriented studies, investigating how the teachers manifest their intentions and flexibility in literacy practices in the classroom.

Conclusions

This study focused on teachers’ intentions and flexibility: that is, the ways in which teachers design and stage the learning environment and situation for the development of literacy skills. It highlights how the intentions behind design and staging have an impact on learning and meaning-making (Jewitt 2009; Kjällander 2011). Our analysis of the participants’ discussion allowed insight into the teachers’ intentions to prevent, identify and remove barriers to students’ literacy development. In this context, flexibility, leading to transformational competence, includes the ability to adjust teaching by making purposeful use of a range of diverse learning resources, approaches, and methods according to different situations and catering for a variety of students. In relation to multimodal and inclusive education, participation and collegial learning processes, the
teachers’ intentions suggested access to transformation competence. In all, the study suggests that the part played by teachers’ intentions and flexibility, in terms of their ability to find solutions to challenges in classroom practice, should not be overlooked in relation to students’ learning progress. It brings with it important implications for supporting teachers with opportunities for collegial learning and collaboration through continuing professional development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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