

Teachers' Perspectives on Supportive and Inclusive Practices: A Study of Four Schools With Diverse Literacy Practices

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Abstract

Previous research states that accessibility and participation are prerequisites for students, regardless of ability, to be able to develop in school. The point of accessibility and participation is that everyone should be able to feel included and have access to learning. From an inclusive education perspective, the interest of this study is how teachers work in diverse literacy practices to address a variety of student conditions and needs. By studying how some primary education teachers describe how they design and stage learning environments, we want to contribute new knowledge about inclusive literacy practices.

The data collection was carried out through focus group discussions. We analysed the data with Critical Literacy (CL) as a theoretical framework, and the related concepts of domination, access, diversity, and design were used. The general impression that emerges from our study is that teachers design literacy activities based on both supportive and inclusive aspects and with a focus on variation and diversity. In the study, more similarities than differences emerged, for instance a focus on multimodal methods and the importance of didactic flexibility. The teachers also highlighted the importance of producing text, not just consuming and processing existing texts. Sometimes the analysis reveals differences. Even so, the teachers' intentions to include all students in the classroom education remain significant.

Keywords: *critical literacy; inclusion; design; diversity; didactic flexibility*

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Introduction

Previous research (e.g. Aspelin, 2013; Florian, 2014; Wedin, 2019) states that accessibility and participation are prerequisites for students, regardless of ability, to be able to develop in school. According to Aspelin (2013), accessibility and participation mean that everyone should be able to feel included and have access to learning. Inclusive teaching involves support for teachers' capacity to respond to the individual variations of students. Inclusive education also entails activities designed

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to create conditions for all students to be able to participate and learn (Howes et al., 2005). From an inclusive education perspective, the focus of this study is how teachers work with their students in diverse literacy practices to address a variety of student conditions and needs. By studying how some teachers, in compulsory schools, describe how they design and stage learning environments, we want to contribute new knowledge about inclusive literacy practices.

According to Janks (2010), literacy is a question of democracy and participation. Among literacy researchers, there is a consensus regarding the importance of deliberate teaching focused on language, content and language use, which enables students to develop communicative skills (cf. Berge et al., 2019; Cummins & Persad, 2014). The ability to engage with different types of oral and written texts with good understanding, to relate critically to texts and to produce texts for different recipients and media, is key to communication (Åkerfeldt, 2014; Cummins, 2012; Forsling, 2017; Neuman, 2017; Olin-Scheller & Tengberg, 2012; Schmidt, 2013).

The Critical Literacy (CL) perspective is relevant to the present study, since it can be related to the research questions that focus on support and inclusion in a social practice. From a CL perspective, the importance of analysing the social practices that include literacy, with a focus on literacy practices in different classrooms, is emphasised (Janks, 2010).

Four schools in Sweden with documented different literacy practices were chosen for the study. One school specialised in education for students with dyslexia and neurological disabilities, one school was particularly oriented towards multimodal reading and writing pedagogy, one school had a majority of students who do not have Swedish as their mother tongue, and one school was for students with learning disabilities. A total of 21 teachers, working with students in Years 1 to 9, participated in the study.

The study is part of a research project with four different stages aimed to initiate and stimulate exchange of knowledge among the participating schools. In the *first stage*, focus group discussions were carried out with the participating teachers at each school separately. In the *second stage*, focus group discussions were carried out with exchanges between the participating groups of teachers at a mini-conference. In the *third stage*, the results from the second stage will be analysed. For this stage, we plan a feedback session with the schools to find out what they have learnt from the project. The *fourth stage* involves a review of the entire project. This article presents results from the first stage, with a focus on how teachers reflect upon supportive and inclusive literacy practices in the focus group discussions.

Aim and research questions

The aim of the article is to discuss how some primary education teachers, working in various literacy practices, describe their design and staging of learning environments to cater to the various needs of their students. Based on the results, we are also interested in the teachers' statements about how supportive and inclusive literacy practices can be manifested.

The following research questions were formulated:

- How do the teachers describe that supportive literacy practices can be designed and staged for diverse learners?
- How do the teachers describe their design and staging of inclusive literacy practices?

Background

This section outlines the context of the present study, linked to the respondents' statements. A few perspectives on special needs education are also introduced to shed light on a significant aspect of the study.

Teaching for language development

Researchers in the field of literacy highlight the importance of teaching for language development where learning, through structured instruction, occurs in meaningful contexts (Berge et al., 2019; Cummins & Persad, 2014; Rose & Martin, 2013). Structured functional instruction is defined by balance between content, language and language use. This kind of balanced teaching includes the teacher's conscious pedagogical choices to move between these aspects (Cummins, 2012; Tjernberg, 2013; Wedin, 2019). For instance, the focus might shift between formal aspects such as phonological awareness and other textual aspects such as conversations about content and function. According to Ivanić (2004), the focus also moves between the content of teaching and societal and political perspectives. In this way, different focuses are placed in the foreground or the background depending on the purpose and context. Pressley and Allington (2015) explain how this shifting of focus aims to build vocabulary, promote reading comprehension and strengthen the ability to adapt texts to the recipient and the medium.

Students need, according to Wedin and Norlund Shaswar (2019), to acquire an understanding of words and concepts at the same time as they develop an ability to approach text critically and reflect upon what they read and write. In a former study, Tjernberg (2013) noted the students' need for support in developing a reasoning language that connected their everyday language with the language that they encountered in school. It was not enough to learn subject-specific words and concepts, since they also need to learn how to reason about content.

As an example of recent research focused on the staging of writing education in the compulsory school classroom, the Norm Project in Norway should be mentioned (Berge et al., 2019). It foregrounds a more systematic teaching of writing. Both the students' development of writing skills and the teachers' competence in terms of assessment are in focus. Cummins (2012) states that the classroom interaction between teachers and students is crucial. In this mutual process, learning and growth happen alongside the development of identities. According to Pressley and

Allington (2015), an interest in and motivation for learning are closely related to students' confidence in their own ability. A study by Wedin (2019) shows that it is important for students' self-image to feel that they can handle the tasks that they are given, which requires teaching to be adapted to the different needs and abilities of students.

Studies by Skar et al. (2020) on students' writing proficiency indicate a wide variation between classes and between schools, even when the conditions offered are similar. These differences are, pursuant to the researchers' analysis, probably the result of teachers adapting work methods and procedures to local needs. Researchers are in agreement about the teacher's significance for students' learning (e.g. Berge et al., 2019; Dillon et al., 2011). 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 obstacles (Forsling & Tjernberg, 2023). In teaching situations, teachers perceive which abilities students need to develop and relate this to their own ability to meet those needs. In this way, Timperley (2019) explains, the teaching is adapted to each student's learning situation.

Inclusive teaching

Inclusive education is an important but complex concept, and how it is defined is significant for how the educational activities are shaped (Forsling & Tjernberg, 2023). Inclusive education could be described as the challenge to reduce barriers everywhere and always, to ensure the participation and learning of all students (e.g. Ferguson, 2008; Florian, 2014; Howes et al., 2005; Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2014). Waitoller and Artiles (2013) explain inclusive education as a process aimed at accommodating the teaching of all students, while Florian (2014) defines inclusive education as "the shift in focus away from ideas of most and some learners to everybody" (p. 289).

According to Florian (2014), inclusive teaching is the pedagogical act in inclusive education. Inclusive teaching involves support for teachers' capacity to respond to the individual variations of students without causing the kind of marginalisation that may ensue when students are treated differently. From this perspective, complex and varied learning situations turn into a type of contextual information that is useful for the teachers' analysis and design of their teaching. Howes et al. (2005) define inclusive practices as activities that create opportunities for the participation and learning of all students. This definition highlights the fact that students are not forced to adapt to an existing situation. Instead, activities are to be designed and staged in such a way that they provide opportunities for every student's participation and learning.

The inclusion process is, according to Florian (2014), contextual and can thus assume many forms depending on the classroom and school environments, different political systems and prevailing educational reforms.

In their study, Göransson et al. (2013) identify frameworks that support the development of inclusive school practices: inclusion as part of school development where

development is seen as an extended process of change, collaboration development in various constellations both in schools and in related contexts, and time dedicated to discussions about pedagogy among teachers. It is also important that a policy document about inclusive practices has been developed collaboratively at each school.

Multimodal learning

At the classroom level, supportive and inclusive teaching practices are characterised by several different approaches and methods. Multimodality is an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective on communication based on interaction and representation (Kress, 2010). This perspective highlights the fact that all forms of expression can be seen as meaningful (Jewitt et al., 2016). Multimodality, according to Selander and Kress (2010), can be understood as the ability to understand and handle many different forms of expression in different textual contexts, in various modalities (sign systems) as well as different simultaneous media. Nevertheless, multimodality does not just involve the use of many modalities. It is also a question of how modalities interact with each other and what this interaction entails.

Jewitt et al. (2016) point out furthermore that there is a difference between using multimodality and assuming multimodal concepts. To be able to include the implementation as well as the assumption of multimodality, a didactic flexibility will be required, both in terms of dealing with individual differences between students and in terms of using various learning tools (Forsling, 2017; Rose & Meyer, 2002). Didactic flexibility also involves the ability to change perspectives and adapt knowledge and content to new contexts (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

A study by Dahlbäck (2017) showed that schools with an explicit multimodal specialisation tend to follow the epistemological view that all sign systems are equal. Aesthetic forms of expression, digital tools and play are important components of multimodal teaching. According to Dahlbäck, multimodal teaching allows multicultural and multilingual sign worlds, which in turn allows more children to make their voices heard. This expansion of sign worlds has beneficial effects on learning in terms of self-confidence and motivation.

Perspectives on special needs education

In this section, we present some special educational perspectives, in order to deepen the context of the study. These perspectives are important for how the teachers design and stage their teaching. In order to manage problematic pedagogical situations, schools often organise segregated learning environments and learning situations for individual students or groups of students outside the everyday activities of the classroom (Aspelin, 2013). This is what Nilholm (2013) defines as a compensatory perspective. According to Aspelin (2013), the compensatory perspective often results in the view that problems in school are related to the individual child and his or her condition. From that perspective, the child is described as a student with special needs, which often results in some form of segregation.

The Swedish Education Act (Skolverket, 2022) is instead based on a relational perspective. If a student is in need of special support, such special support is to be offered. This perspective highlights the importance of interaction throughout the entire organisation. All interactions are aimed at the entire situation – student, teacher and learning environment. Ahlberg (2009) shows that the organisation of learning situations is crucial for students in need of special support. The special needs education resources are distributed in different ways based on the views on learning and special support at each school or community. From a relational perspective, special needs education is incorporated and integrated into the everyday work at school, a form of inclusion (Persson, 2013). Teaching and learning problems are described as caused by different phenomena, for example how learning environments and learning situations are designed and staged, teachers' competencies or teachers' lack of skills.

Theoretical framework

Literacy is a complex concept that encompasses more than just the technical aspects of learning how to read and write. It is also a research field with conflicting opinions, for example when it comes to the value of explicit teaching (Bremholm et al., 2022; Rose & Martin, 2013). The concept of literacy practice is used in this particular study as an umbrella term where an expanded text concept is foregrounded. According to this perspective, literacy practice is a social activity which includes critical thinking and multimodality, where a range of different sign resources are used in classrooms that provide all students with an opportunity for meaning-making learning experiences (cf. Aagaard & Lund, 2013).

To describe and understand complex literacy practices, the perspective of 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). We found this interesting in relation to our study, as it helped us to focus on how teachers talk about their design and staging of supportive and inclusive literacy practices to help students develop their decoding, meaning-making, functional language use and critical approach in relation to different types of texts (Barton, 2007; Kress, 2010; Olin-Scheller & Tengberg, 2012).

Janks (2010) describes how CL research is based on the assumption that visual, oral, written and digital texts constitute different ways to describe the world and offer possibilities to interpret, question and reshape it. Janks (2000, 2010) mentions four dimensions of written language: domination (power), access (accessibility), diversity and design. These four dimensions are intimately connected; they overlap each other and play a necessary part in understanding and realising the extent of what a literacy

practice involves. Janks (2000) states that language and other symbolic forms can be seen as powerful means for maintaining and reproducing relations of domination. The dimension of domination, which can be recognised as underlying structures, shows who is allowed and not allowed to write and what type of language should be used according to the dominant discourse. Domination distinguishes a text and decides what creates and distinguishes a prevailing custom. According to Janks (2000, 2014), all texts are seen as constructions and can therefore be deconstructed. The language and images in texts can, once deconstructed, reveal concepts, such as value bases, silences and whose interests are served, that is, the dimensions of domination.

Access concerns questions about the balance between power and diversity. If students are given access to the dominant discourses, Janks (2010) states that this contributes to the preservation of these forms. If the students are denied access to discourse, this instead contributes to marginalisation and decreased chances of meaning-making in the learning situation. According to Luke and Freebody (1999), creating meaning through and from texts includes both the understanding and the authoring of meaningful written, visual and spoken texts. The system of meaning in each text relates to the participants' knowledge and experience of other discourses, texts and meaning systems.

Diversity is about using a large number of modalities to reconstruct the world and, in that way, develop consciousness. Kress (2010) emphasises how diversity in school can contribute to students feeling comfortable, despite stark differences in the culture and social values that they encounter on a daily basis. Furthermore, Janks (2010) states that diversity from a CL perspective may include social and ethnic diversity in the classroom or in other social institutions and that diversity requires inclusion.

The fourth dimension, design, includes the idea of the power of production, according to Janks (2000, 2010, 2014). It involves an ability to handle the diversity of semiotic systems that traverse various cultures and discourses. In order to create meaning, one has to choose among all available semiotic resources and combine them to produce new representations. This is a question, then, of multimodal production and reconstruction of text in a wide sense with the aid of many different modalities.

Both Janks (2000) and Luke (2004) recommend a CL perspective in education. Using this perspective while working with texts, teachers can help students understand what dimensions are present, the voice behind the text and which voices remain silent. Furthermore, by using questions from students that arise from their lives in teaching situations, it is possible to deconstruct texts and, in turn, question the power perspective, Schmidt (2013) explains. This means that dialogue and negotiation, where teachers and students engage together, are key components for literacy development.

Schmidt (2013) proposes that the CL perspective may stimulate and inspire new pedagogical and didactic methods. Bergöö and Jönsson (2009), who have applied the perspective of CL on classroom environments, define the concept as follows:

To teach and learn how texts work, to teach and understand what texts are trying to do in the world and with people, and to encourage children/students to take an active stand in relation to texts in order to critically examine and reconstruct the reality in which they live and work. (p. 43)

According to Luke (2004), CL practice in school thus entails the creation of procedures based on an understanding of language practices, power relations and identities. This also involves analysing what images and texts show, and what and who are included or excluded. Schmidt (2013) highlights the significance of giving students the opportunity to express what they think in front of the group and of teachers providing structured support to enable successful literacy work. Research from Labadie et al. (2012) also shows that teaching which is focused on students' life worlds, through conversations and interaction, can develop students literacy.

From the CL dimensions of access and domination, questions of democracy become interesting. The starting points of democratic language work based on CL relate, according to Schmidt (2013), in part to the texts that the teaching starts out from and in part to the rewritings, positioning and interpretations that are enabled. Schmidt emphasises the importance of creating opportunities to enhance the students' possibilities for being heard. When students have access to literacy practices, they can see themselves as meaning-makers and citizens who can observe, question, change and reconstruct texts. Luke and Freebody (1999) claim that the ability to critically examine and understand, and to read between and beyond the lines, enables people to question domination and inequality. Janks (2010) also points out that critical text work can lead to change since it creates opportunities for people to reflect upon both their identities and the world around them. In literacy practices where students with various disabilities participate, it is probably going to be particularly meaningful to offer agency and power to understand and deal with aspects of life.

The four dimensions of domination, access, diversity and design are interconnected, overlapping and necessary for understanding the full extent of what a literacy practice entails. We will use Janks' four CL concepts to analyse the material in this study.

Method

This article is based on a research project in which 21 teachers from four schools are participants. The schools, with documented different literacy practices, are located in four different municipalities across Sweden. They were selected for the study. One school specialises in education for students with dyslexia and neurological disabilities (henceforth called the D/nd school), one school is particularly oriented towards multimodal reading and writing pedagogy (the Literacy school), one school where the majority of students do not have Swedish as their mother tongue (the Multilingual school), and one school for students with learning disabilities (the Special Needs

school). Three of the groups included teachers working in Years 1–3. The fourth group (D/nd school) included teachers working in Years 4–9.

We were interested in investigating how teachers working with very different literacy practices express their knowledge of how supporting and inclusive literacy practices can be designed and staged. The selection of respondents was made strategically in relation to the intention of the study to make visible teachers' ideas of literacy practices that can create opportunities for the students' participation and learning. Accordingly, four different literacy practices were selected to ensure both depth and breadth in teachers' experiences and students' different abilities and needs related to learning.

To collect data from group interaction around the specified subject of teachers' ideas regarding literacy practices, focus group discussions were conducted (cf. Wibeck, 2010). A focus group discussion can be described as a flexible, collective activity in which participants have agency to discuss and reflect upon their design for learning (Cohen et al., 2011). The aim of the focus group discussions in this study was to arrive at a collective point of view, that is, the overall opinions and statements of the group. In other words, we were interested in the collected knowledge and experience of the entire group of teachers in relation to the design and staging of literacy practices that promote students' learning. The conversations were recorded and then transcribed in their entirety.

Focus group discussions offer benefits when the participants, as in this study, have a similar background, in this case teaching experience, and there is room for more detailed and deeper knowledge about the subject in question. According to Wibeck (2010), learning is gained from this shared foundation of experience. Conversely, teachers with different backgrounds – in these cases, teachers working in different literacy practices – instead broaden the reflection. Taken together, these aspects constitute an optimal zone for reflection.

Focus group conversations as a data collection method may have limitations in the sense that the teachers influence each other's opinions and thoughts, which can be both positive and negative. They might also decide to withhold information. We are aware of the risk that the presence of the researcher may affect the conversation and therefore we took the role of moderators (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Implementation

Before the focus group discussion was carried out, teachers in the selected schools were contacted and informed about the aims and implementation of the research project. In connection with this, written consent to participate was obtained. The focus group discussion, which lasted approximately two hours, was carried out at each school after the end of the students' school day.

Focus group discussions typically begin with the group receiving some form of inspirational material and a question to start the conversation (Wibeck, 2010), and this was also the case in the present study. The researcher's role was to be a moderator

and allocate speaking time, but otherwise remain silent. The stimulus material used on this occasion was a picture book. The selection of this book was based on the idea that a book with both engaging text and illustrations was needed. The conversation began with the following question: “Based on a book, how would you work to provide support and inclusive education to create conditions for all students to be able to participate and learn?”

Then the teachers browsed through the book together. They studied the text and the pictures and reacted to various aspects that they identified as opportunities to teach language development. In the conversation, the teachers shared ideas and suggestions, referred to how they work with other texts and related those experiences to the stimulus material. They went on a voyage of discovery in the book, discovered possibilities and ideas were born.

Process of analysis

The analysis of the conversations was carried out at the group level in accordance with the method of focus group discussion. This involves, according to Parker and Tritter (2006), an awareness of individual contributions to the contribution of the entire group, something that was taken into account in the present study.

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 & Bernhard, 2003). After the first categorisation, a new set of themes was established based on the CL concepts of domination, access, diversity and design (Janks, 2014). In our analysis, domination can be recognised when the teachers discuss how underlying structures are revealed in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of text. This process occurs when the students, for example, are writing poems, inspired by books or oral tellings. A given text is transformed, that is, analysed and then synthesised in another form.

Access is made visible in the teachers’ discussion of how the students are given access to different types of texts and genres that are meaningful to them. The teachers also discuss access to different learning tools to support their students’ literacy development. The concept of diversity crops up in two ways in the material: on the one hand, through the teachers’ statements regarding their use of a diverse range of tools for learning; and, on the other hand, diversity is related to the students’ variation in ability when turned into an advantage as a creative resource for learning. Finally, the concept of design is made visible in the statements related to the creation of learning processes in which many actors participate and multimodal tools are used.

Results and analysis

The results are presented in two sections related to the research questions: *Supportive literacy practices* and *Inclusive literacy practices*.

The quotes in the results section have been selected to illustrate the reflections of the focus groups. Unless stated otherwise, the quotes represent the collective statements of groups, in accordance with the objective of focus group discussion. The analytical CL concepts of domination, access, design and diversity were used to enhance the theoretical understanding of how supportive and inclusive literacy practices can be manifested in a classroom.

Supportive literacy practices

In the focus group discussions, the teachers described how supportive literacy practices can be designed and staged for diverse learners. The teachers highlighted teaching aimed at developing language and knowledge where different forms of expression were combined. The opportunities for learning that the teachers mentioned represent a structured form of instruction with a focus on diversity and participation. The teachers emphasised, for example, the importance of multimodal and collaborative learning situations:

We usually introduce a new book by creating a vocabulary and thoughts together based on the book cover. We use the projector. We ask questions and talk, starting out from prompts like: I see... I think... I wonder... Everyone can participate.

The teachers described their design and staging of a diverse range of literacy activities. They gave examples of how it is possible to shift the focus between teaching the form and function of language and between different topics and genres, as well as link the content of a text to social and political issues. From a CL perspective, this signifies a design process that tries out dominating genres, which means that the teachers help the students to deconstruct and reconstruct texts to find underlying structures, showing who is allowed and not allowed to write, and what type of language should be used to facilitate both understanding and change.

Another suggestion for supportive teaching that came up is to identify with the situation of the characters in a text. One of the teachers said that after reading aloud, they usually wrote together about what they found out about the characters. "We follow in the footsteps of the characters and get to know them." In his class, they typically work together first to provide the students with a structure, and then individually: "We begin with oral tasks and then move on to writing." As extra support, students may "have writing buddies and work on their own iPads:"

In order not to impede thought, but instead create flow. We imitate the author, we start out from the author's words to promote quality, to make sure it does not turn out too simple.

For supportive literacy work, the teachers emphasised the importance of paying attention to words and expressions and their meaning. The teachers provided examples of how to start out from texts to work with formal aspects, such as vocabulary knowledge and understanding, synonyms, compound words, sentence structure, thought

bubbles, spelling, double consonants, dialogue and so on. As an example, one teacher pointed to a line in the stimulus book:

Look, “It seems as if Adam was asleep when he was awake, and was awake when he slept.” How is this done, actually?

The teachers stated that the work with words needs to be done in a context where the function is obvious to the students. One of the teachers drew attention to an expression in the stimulus material and pointed out an opportunity to work in an interdisciplinary manner:

Look at this. He is gigantic, right, but she is very small here. Still she stands on a box. It is actually great fun to talk about proportions... a little math can be included.

Moreover, the teachers said that it is possible to, with the starting point of a book or a movie, talk about issues that lead to thoughts and take advantage of the opportunity to ask metacognitive questions. They highlighted one example from the stimulus book:

Do you want me to make honey cakes for you? it says in the book. That is another one of those questions. Why did she ask that? How are honey cakes related to what is going on?

The teachers at the D/nd school emphasised how different multimodal methods can support students’ literacy development. They mentioned pictorial support and reading aloud, for instance, as important components for students with language difficulties. In relation to the stimuli material, they discussed various alternative learning tools for making texts accessible:

The first thing that had been done was to scan the book, to make it possible to read it on the computer. Then turn it into a PDF and make it readable through ClaroRead.

Furthermore, these teachers highlighted alternative ways to handle the accessibility of texts, by using a service that provides a recording of someone reading aloud. The problem then is that students cannot underline or write comments in the text. Students with a dyslexia diagnosis also need to be able to go back multiple times to the original text to look and compare. As one teacher said, they need to “flip through the pages. No matter what level, no matter what year they are in, our students need to be able to go back, many, many times.” This teacher deviated from the other participants in the focus group by saying that he would rather “concentrate on the text much more than focus on pictures.” The group discussed whether this is because of the make-up of the class or the students’ problems. The intention, however, is to provide the “weakest students” with an opportunity to increase their ability. He said:

I would almost have wanted the weakest students to have the difficult words in advance, partly to make them more confident when reading, but also to boost them a bit in preparation for talking about what it says in the text.

Design involves the ability to handle the diversity of semiotic systems that influence various cultures and discourses (Janks, 2010). The teachers in the study pointed out that they and the students had to choose among all available semiotic resources and combine them to produce new representations, in order to create meaning. This is, according to Janks (2010) a question of multimodal production and reconstruction of text in a wide sense with the aid of many different modalities.

In all four focus group discussions, multimodal methods were highlighted as a foundation for support. The Literacy school's teachers offered a clearer picture of how they support structured teaching practices for developing language and knowledge, compared to what we can see in the statements from the teachers in the other schools. In the conversation, they provided several concrete examples of how they work multimodally with different forms of expression, such as speech, writing, drama, music and crafts, to create opportunities based on students' different abilities:

Stop and look at the picture, build vocabulary, pay attention to words and sentences – but also perform small role-play dramas: If we want to cheer someone up, what can we do? This is actually a really good exercise, to make someone who is sad feel happy again. How do we make each other happy in this class?

The teachers in the Literacy school explained that they give students the opportunity to express their opinions in front of the group. They described how they usually move from the surface of the text to more in-depth levels, how they study pictures and compare them, and how they learn to grasp the text in its entirety to be able to compare it to their own experiences and other texts that they know about. The teachers emphasised the significance of giving the students the opportunity to use and develop their literacy through asking and answering questions about the text. In these conversations, the author and the illustrator behind a text could also be foregrounded, as well as connections to other texts and contexts:

Getting to know the writer behind the text and note if we have read books before by the same writer. That is what we usually do when we introduce books... The illustrator as well. What was the illustrator thinking when the pictures were created, what emotion or atmosphere do they convey?

The teachers at the Special Needs school talked about “the supporting structures for reading and writing and to add music or crafts because that expands the experience so much.” One teacher pointed out that it is important to “provide as many different inputs as possible for students with different perceptive abilities to have access to their share.” The teachers at the Special Needs school explained that they usually begin with play and work actively with playful writing. Playful writing starts out from reading aloud and proceeds to play its way into the text. Based on an oral story, the students play with LEGOs and then write or tell stories “about what they have built.” According to the teachers, this provided “an extra supportive structure. They can distance themselves from grim reality through building and at the same time be able to talk about it, as if imagining their LEGO play in the third person enabled them to

talk.” One of the teachers reflected upon the consequences of this method related to some of her young students with suicidal thoughts:

I imagine that it can be really cathartic for children who have these types of thoughts, and then playful writing is available as a tool, to be able to channel and express it.

We can relate these reflections to Janks’ (2010) statement that design includes the idea of the power of production. It is through their own text production that individuals position their identity in relation to the world around them and as text creators. This can also be a way of getting access to new knowledge, new genres and new arenas.

Inclusive literacy practices

While looking at the stimulus book and discussing it with each other, the teachers described their design and staging of inclusive literacy practices. The teachers pointed out different passages in the book where they identified opportunities for literacy instruction, based on the different abilities and needs of the students, in connection with their students’ life worlds. They inspired and were inspired by each other in their reflections. In this context, the teachers identified possibilities to include social issues and aspects of power, such as poverty, emigration, violence and domination, through connecting the content of the book with the students’ experiences and life worlds.

At the Multilingual school, the teachers talked a great deal about how the content of teaching can be connected to the students’ life worlds, language and experiences in order to promote understanding and facilitate learning. In this context, translanguaging is a central concept. The teachers described how they select words from a text and write the words in both languages. In this way, they explained, the different language processes support each other through “seeing, hearing, and doing.” The teachers also mentioned the importance of finding out and learning about the students’ cultures, experiences, knowledge, and learning together. The teachers saw the potential in working with stories, both orally and in writing, and suggested that a book like the stimulus book could be used for theme work:

In the book, they live on different sides of an ocean. That could be something to work with, moving to another country, changing cultures. Working a bit more broadly, thematically. What does it mean to have a new home country and what experiences do their families have? There are surely lots of students who have stories from home that they want to tell.

The teachers said that they often write poems together and in those situations work with language, both at the level of words and at the level of content from the perspective of society and the students’ lives. One of the teachers said, “We work with the group and the idea of ‘us’ first, nobody should feel pushed to start working without this foundation. And the idea of supporting each other.” The teachers gave examples of how the content of a stimulus material could be used to respond to the different abilities and needs of different students, not least in terms of how it could be used

in teaching to promote the learning of newly arrived immigrant students and create opportunities for participation and learning.

The teachers at the Literacy school saw potential in relating the content of teaching to the students' experiences and life worlds. They referred to engaging passages in the stimulus book as examples:

In his dreams, Adam is always looking for Rufus [his dog]. What are your dreams about? What can dreams be about? Nightmares, good dreams...

Look, up here it says that he shoed her out of his shop and called her a beggar. We can talk about that...

The teachers highlighted the importance of students having agency through access to different discourses and the power of using them for themselves. This aspect of the design process can be related to the statement by Janks (2014), that CL is not only about deconstruction and about reconstruction of texts, it is just as important for students to be able to design their own texts. It is through their own text production that individuals can position themselves in relation to the world around them and as text creators. This can also be a way of getting access to new knowledge, new genres and new arenas.

Through offering several different forms of expression, the teachers in the Literacy school wanted to create opportunities based on the different abilities and needs of students. When they write poems, they work with the text at the level of words (form), who the receiver is (function), and the level of content from the perspective of society and the students' lives: "We work together first as a group, provide structure, for everyone to feel safe."

The teachers at the Multilingual school also pointed out how it is possible to connect content to the students' lives and experiences. In the stimulus book, a passage described that papers and guards were required to pass over a bridge:

It would be possible to create a theme about this, why do people move and why do people flee? We usually select words from the text and talk about them, we can for instance select words like 'flee' and 'move' and talk about moving and fleeing, these are two different things.

The teachers at the Special Needs school also highlighted existential perspectives. They discussed how it is possible to talk in class about themes present in the text: friendship, longing, fear, doubt, death, joy, hope, and security. They also noted that it is important for teachers to be well-prepared in relation to the particular group of students and the questions and thoughts that may arise. In school, there might, for instance, be children who are suicidal, "we do have students here who do not want to live." In this context, the importance of working together as a teaching team is foregrounded in their reflections:

And maybe it would be a good thing at a school like ours to start out from the same book, and add music or drama, and present to each other the various outcomes of

it in all subjects – crafts, music, and art. This could be a way to create unity around the concept of *us*. So I think it could have rather amazing results to be able to work with the same book, discuss the same thing.

The teachers discussed that teachers need preparedness and a varied range of skills to be able to work supportively in complex literacy practices, and how supported and inclusive literacy practices can be manifested. All the teachers in the focus groups related their teaching to the abilities and the diversity of needs of their students. From a CL perspective, diversity is about taking advantage of individual differences, an ability to read, understand and handle contrasting opinions and discourses (Janks, 2010). An interesting difference in the material emerges at this point. The teachers at the D/nd school found it difficult to see how it would be possible to work together across the entire school, but they did see the potential of teaching students from a particular class in different reading groups, including a combination of “weak readers” and students with more developed reading skills. The teachers regarded differences as an obstacle to interaction, while the teachers at the other schools expressed the opinion that the students’ differences could offer valuable diversity.

When the teachers described supportive education, we noticed that they simultaneously talked about inclusive teaching. In the same way, we find that the four CL concepts are closely interlinked in the analysis of the teachers’ statements, and that no concept can be seen as independent in relation to the others (cf. Janks, 2010).

Discussion

The aim of the article is to discuss how some primary education teachers, working with various literacy practices, described their design and staging of learning environments to cater to the varied needs of their students, and how supportive and inclusive literacy practices can be manifested.

Supportive and inclusive teaching can be seen as two sides of the same coin. A supportive practice is always to some extent inclusive, and inclusive teaching always involves some kind of support. Even so, we have structured the discussion around the two different concepts to reflect the structure of the article as a whole.

Design for supportive literacy practices

Most of what the teachers participating in the study discussed and reflected upon is comparable across all four groups, for instance the idea of an expanded text concept, a focus on multimodal methods and the importance of didactic flexibility. Differences between the respondents’ statements involved, among other things, access to necessary tools for learning, and the difficulties of working in inclusive ways that arise due to the organisation of a school and the population of students, aspects highlighted by the D/nd school.

The design of literacy activities is a process which can be deconstructed and reconstructed, just like the texts that the students work with (cf. Janks, 2014, Selander &

Kress, 2010). A holistic view of support emerged from the teachers' statements. It includes, on the one hand, variation and guidance in the writing process and, on the other hand, the teachers' intentions to connect the texts that they work with to the students' life worlds. Working with a text can offer students a chance to understand their own life, context and time, from personal everyday thoughts to societal issues or the large-scale global situation that influences their lives. There also seemed to be a consensus among the teachers that writing work should not just be about consuming and processing existing texts. It is, according to several researchers (cf. Cummins & Persad, 2014; Forsling & Tjernberg, 2020; Schmidt, 2013; Wedin, 2019), through one's own text production that individuals can position themselves in relation to their identities and to the world around them. This is a process which Janks (2014) relates to as dimensions of domination, access, diversity, and design. The teachers at all schools also highlighted the importance of considering the students' interests and motivation in order to build trusting relationships – a prerequisite for inclusive teaching. This is in accordance with Cummins and Persad (2014).

The analysis of the participants' statements brought to light literacy practices where supportive and inclusive education can be seen from a CL perspective. According to Luke (2004), critical literacy in school means meaning-making based on texts, and involves both the understanding and the authoring of meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts. The teachers participating in the study described how they, together with the students, moved around in the text, travelled from its surface to its depths, examined and compared. This corresponds to Labadie et al. (2012), who emphasise the importance of focusing on students' abilities in teaching. Through this approach, teachers create opportunities for students to express their opinions and make their voices heard in several different ways. Schmidt (2013) points out that school is a much too silent learning environment in this regard. Our study presents a different picture. The teachers described how supportive and inclusive teaching based on the different abilities of students entails varied literacy activities where various multimodal approaches are used for communication and meaning-making. Multimodal teaching, according to Janks (2010), embraces multicultural and multilingual sign worlds, which gives more students, regardless of ability and context, a chance to make their voices heard. Dahlbäck (2017) shows that this kind of expansion of sign worlds has proven beneficial for learning in terms of self-confidence and motivation.

Sometimes the discussions in the focus groups revealed differences when teachers described how they design literacy practices in order to support their students. Even so, the goal is mutual – to include all students in classroom education. According to Pressley and Allington (2015), teaching should be adapted to the different abilities and needs of students through systematic, structured instruction that includes several different approaches, methods and modalities. At the D/nd school, digital resources, such as ClaroRead and computers, are important learning tools. The Multilingual school foregrounds translanguaging and various issues related to home language instruction. The importance of using pictures and working thematically to

provide support and create a context for the content is also noted here. At the Special Needs school, play and playful forms of communication, such as play writing, were described as effective ways to explore writing and reading. The teachers emphasised that it is important to prepare teaching carefully and read the texts that will be used in advance in order to be able to respond to the students' learning. The teachers also highlighted existential perspectives on how to discuss engaging and sometimes frightening themes present in the text. This could be related to what Berge et al. (2019) call deliberate teaching, which enables students to develop diverse communicative skills. Based on the statements from the teachers at the Literacy school, they seem to work broadly with a conscious, structured and balanced teaching design. This type of design is not as apparent in the statements from the other schools. There could be a number of different reasons for this. One of the reasons may involve organisation. For example, do the teachers receive the support and the in-service training that they need to be able to design and stage a well-functioning literacy practice? On the other hand, are the designs connected to the schools' different definitions of special needs education (cf. Persson, 2013)?

Furthermore, three out of the four schools seemed to rely on a relational perspective on special needs education, as all supportive interventions were related to the school as a whole – special need efforts were incorporated and integrated in the everyday activities of the school (cf. Ahlberg, 2009). In contrast, the teachers at the D/nd school seemed to convey a compensatory perspective. They discussed teaching design in relation to the various diagnoses of students and how difficulties can be compensated for by means of different aids (cf. Persson, 2013). It seems reasonable to think that the teachers at the Special Needs school would also have spoken in terms of a compensatory perspective since their students have various forms of disability, but there are no indications of this in the results. This might indicate that their work is based on a relational perspective in special needs education.

Designs for inclusive literacy practices

According to Florian (2014), inclusive teaching practices are characterised by the use of several different approaches and methods. This means that collaborative learning, which includes instruction in metacognitive and reading comprehension strategies and text awareness, needs to be adapted to be effective for students with different abilities and needs. The multimodal teaching described by the teachers in the study may lead to more students being able to make their voices heard. They will have the opportunity to express themselves in the language and the modality that they know best and experience that they are able to handle the tasks that they are given. However, a prerequisite for an optimal multimodal approach, according to Borgfeldt and Lyngfelt (2017), is that the teacher can assess multimodal text production. Borgfeldt and Lyngfelt highlight the significance of using different resources to reach learning goals and point out that these resources are equal and based on the need for an accessible, inclusive school environment for all students. The focus group

discussions in the present study showed that multimodal text production seemed to be a natural part of teaching in the four schools, which probably means that the teachers over time acquired a certain habit of both presenting and assessing the students' creative work.

According to Pressley and Allington (2015), teaching should be adapted to the different abilities and needs of students through systematic, structured instruction, which includes several different approaches, methods and modalities. The present study is part of a research project which aims to initiate and stimulate the exchange of knowledge among the participating schools. The professional learning was visible in the focus group discussions, in terms of how the teachers learned from each other when they shared thoughts and ideas, which deepened and broadened the discussion. An interesting finding is how the teachers throughout the focus discussions in their reflections on the design and staging of their literacy teaching constantly related to their specific current students, classes and context. We think that the collegial potential of focus group discussions is an issue that could be explored in future research.

Conclusions

The study focused on how the participating teachers described their design and staging of the learning environment and situation to cater to the needs of all students. It highlights the teachers' desire/intention for inclusive teaching to have an impact on learning and meaning-making.

Our analysis allowed insight into the teachers' reflections on similarities and differences in how to design and stage literacy practices. The overall impression that emerged in our study is that the teachers emphasised the importance of designing literacy practices based on both supportive and inclusive aspects.

An interesting finding is that no respondent claimed that students must adapt to an existing literacy practice. Instead, they highlighted that literacy activities have to be designed and staged in such a way that they provide opportunities for all students' participation and learning.

We believe that this indicates that the teachers have a fundamentally relational perspective on teaching, perhaps even the view that supportive and inclusive pedagogy forecloses the need for special needs education.

Limitations and future research

Generalisation is not possible based on 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 supportive and inclusive literacy practices.

The present study suggests several significant areas for future research. We contend that our study demonstrates the value of studying different literacy practices

to increase understanding of how design and staging can create conditions for the participation and learning of all students. A task for future research could be to try to analyse the reasons for both the similarities and differences in design and staging. In addition, a more extensive study based on both conversations and observations would offer an even broader understanding of the design and staging of supportive and inclusive teaching.

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