Disability studies and their importance for special education professionals

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Disabled students are more and more being taught in general classes and schools, which are also changing. This poses a new challenge both for general and special educators, and for teachers and researchers in higher education who train teachers. The purpose of this article is to argue for the importance of changing the roles of special and general educators, and their training, with the aim of enabling them to work collaboratively as professional teams, for quality education of all students in inclusive settings. For that end disability studies (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999) can provide general and special educators and their trainers and professors, with an important new lens with which to view and understand the significance of difference and disability within our schools and society (Ferguson, Ralph & Sampson, 2002).

First, the article will sketch out some changes in Icelandic society and schools as well as three strands of educational reforms that are affecting teaching and learning in most Western countries including Iceland. Next, the paper looks at what disability studies have to offer in clarifying and reassessing the educational purpose of inclusive education, and how that field is...
relevant to special education professionals. Third, the paper draws upon interviews with three special educators who describe their roles as special educators in general inclusive schools (Bjarnason, 2004).1

The teachers' voices serve here to illuminate how special educators are currently, almost single handedly, trying to reinvent their roles, and deal with legislative and policy requirement of school inclusion for all, within schools that are bureaucratically structured for general educators and able bodied learners. The special teachers' voices, their experiments, tasks and concerns, reflect three different points of view on the role of special educators, what special education should be, and how and where it should be applied.

The voices inform with other data, lessons for higher education teacher training, listed towards the end of this article. Other sources for this paper include data and findings from a preliminary qualitative study of six Icelandic schools (an early childhood/preschool, two compulsory general education schools, a compulsory special school, and an upper secondary school), which is a part of a research in progress into the situation of all children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Icelandic schools (Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2003). Official documents, laws and regulations are also referred to.

The article concludes with six lessons, drawn from these sources for the future training of special educators. The lessons encapsulate some of the challenges we face as teachers and special educators, and as higher education teachers and researchers, within educational policy and practice transitioning towards inclusive schooling for all learners. It is argued that traditional special education should be replaced with the training of all teachers to work with all children, and with a new specialized teacher role, the «inclusion expert». The inclusion expert, it is argued, should be equipped with perspectives from the field of disability studies, collaboration techniques with children and adults, and teachers’ skills from both general and special pedagogy.

Changes in Icelandic schools and society

At the beginning of a new millennium our schools, like our societies, struggle to anticipate the changes that will be needed in the near future. In Iceland like in most other Western countries, significant changes affect most aspects of human life, new options, challenges and new choices are predominant. On the world scene, the Icelandic political landscape is changing fast following the end of the cold war and later its new (peripheral) location as a participant in the American-led war on terrorism.

Still Iceland is drawing closer to Europe through the EES contract, being bound by rules and regulations from Brussels. Economic changes include the opening up of new world wide financial markets and the European labor market. This is accompanied by a growing belief in neo-liberal individualism, and the gradual erosion of the Icelandic welfare state (Ólafsson, 1999). These changes of Icelandic society threaten to decrease mutuality and trust, increase prejudice, and divide social groups even more than before. At the same time the student population in our schools has become more diverse than ever before in cultural background, ability and disability, learning style and interests, and with regard to socio-economic background (Ragnarsdóttir, 2002; Njálsdóttir, 2003).

Schools are changing, and the diversity of the school population seems to be increasing in most Western countries including Iceland (OECD, 1999). Ferguson and her colleagues identify three strands of reforms currently af-
fecting schools and teachers in Northern America. I suggest that these strands of reforms also affect Icelandic schools. Ferguson suggests that two of these strands come from developments in general education and the third from special education (Ferguson, et al., 2002). Similar trends are emerging in the Icelandic school policy and practice (see Althingi, 1991, 1995, 1996; Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999; Fræðsluráð Reykjavíkurborgar, 2001). These set the stage for current school reforms and for higher education teacher training in the new millennium.

The first, «the top down strand», comes from a broad national and municipal policy level, that have introduced new laws, rules and ideas aimed at efficiency – in terms of how many students complete compulsory and upper-secondary education and how well they do on national tests, while remaining as cost effective as possible (see Althingi, 1991, 1995, 1996; Fræðsluráð Reykjavíkurborgar, 2001). One aspect of this top down strand is a call for better, more cost effective, school management. At the upper secondary level the current policy makers discuss reducing the years it takes to graduate; or from a four years to three and introduce standardized national tests in up to three subjects (Althingi, 2004).

The second strand can be identified more as a «bottom up» strand. It comes from teachers at all school levels, who are increasingly experimenting with new curricular and teaching approaches that emphasize students mastery of academic, creative and thinking skills, of collaboration, problem solving, and general life skills (Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavík, 2002). These teachers are encouraged in their search for new approaches by official policy makers at state and municipal levels, growing number of educational associations and interest groups”, and by some of national and international education research communities (The Iceland University of Education Research Center homepage; NERA -Nordic Educational Research Association homepage).

Examples of sources of such encouragements are for example the current National Compulsory Education Curriculum (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999), educational municipal policy documents e.g. Reykjavík Educational Board Manifesto (Fræðsluráð Reykjavíkurborgar, 2001) and new funds for school program development. Teachers’ and school development programs are also fuelled by educational research carried out or mitigated by staff at the Iceland Education University and other national and international educational departments at university levels (Mýrdal, 2004). Two important features of this second strand of school reforms are for teachers to help students to be able to use their learning in their lives outside schools and to enable them to gain an understanding and appreciation of their own learning so as to encourage them to pursue ongoing lifelong learning in step with rapid and continuous social changes.

The third reform strand comes from special education, but is prescribed by the civil rights logic of «one school for all», which has been laid down as the policy in Iceland and many other countries. This reform strand comes from a discussion of where special education should take place and which students should be served by it, how and why. In the 1980’s the discussion evolved around integration of disabled students into general education schools. But since the 1990s the discussion has moved to focus more on the inclusion of all learners into improved, flexible and supportive schools where teaching and learning focus on individual learners’ strengths, needs and interests (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999; Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavík, 2002; Jóhannesson, 2001).
Three results are emerging within our schools in response to the reform strands. These entail changed teaching methods and sometimes changed general educators’ roles in the face of growing student diversity, increased emphasis upon efficiency and quality control, and a shift in the roles and daily duties of special educators.

The first response to the reform strands
School and classroom diversity is increasing, and that includes diversity regarding disability, learning and behavior styles. Ten years ago, for example, hardly any of the Reykjavík schools had a disabled student in general education class, but today 29 of the 38 Reykjavík schools have one or more students labeled with intellectual disabilities, mostly included in mainstream classes. In all some 500 children labeled disabled are current students in general education compulsory schools in Reykjavík and get individualized finance in connection with their labels. In addition some 14% of all students in general education compulsory schools in Reykjavík, are identified as having special educational needs due to learning difficulties or behavior problems (Morthens, 2004).

The Reykjavík Special Education Manifesto (Fræðsluráð Reykjavíkurborgar, 2001) is seen to provide a roadmap to change from segregated to inclusive schooling for almost all. It is currently being implemented, casting its special education system into temporary turmoil. These numbers suggest that more children labeled disabled, or with special needs have been accepted or identified by the urban schools than ever before. When Reykjavík teachers are asked to identify recent changes in education, most will put student diversity and students behavior problems at the top of their list (Bjarnason, 2004; Morthens, 2004). Many teachers seem to believe that the concept of «a normal student», if such a student ever existed in the shifting landscape of schools, is disappearing fast as a useful construct for designing teaching, learning and classroom management. This is documented elsewhere regarding Nordic schools (e.g. Person, 2003).

Teachers are greatly concerned. The growing diversity in our schools, accompanied by educational and pedagogical demands, and a maize of bureaucratic rules and regulations, result in what many teachers describe as diminished professional freedom and job satisfaction (Mýrdal, 2004; Jóhannesson, Geirsdóttir, Finnbogason & Mýrdal, 2001). Still, many teachers accept the challenge of trying out new collaborative methods and new roles, in order to blend together special – and general education practices, to provide their students with a meaningful curriculum, quality teaching and necessary support, in the spirit of inclusive schooling. Others find these changes harder to deal with. Reports of feelings of burnout or helplessness are all too common amongst general educators, and the shift in roles threatens special educators with the loss of status, influence and the core of what makes their profession special (Marínósson & Bjarnason, 2003). Such frustrations are reflected in the slogans currently in vogue many staff room discussions. They are: «individualized education», «behavior modification», and «more resources for special support».

The second response to the reform strands
The second result, apparently related to demands for efficiency, is that separate special education schools and special classrooms are gradually diminishing, at least at preschool and compulsory education levels. No special classes or special schools are operated any more at preschool level. A few years ago there were six special schools at compulsory level in Iceland, there of five in Reykjavík, with 0.9% of all students aged 6–16 (OECD, 1999). No special schools are left outside
Reykjavík. But Reykjavík has currently 0.8% of its compulsory school students in three special schools; two schools (that will be amalgamated by spring 2005) one for 97 learners, and the other with 19 learners, with intellectual disability, and the third brand new school for a few students with behavior, social and emotional problems.

There is no reliable information about the number of special classes in Iceland. But in Reykjavík five such classes remain with a total of 38 students (for students labeled with autism, physical disabilities and as deaf). Two of these will be closing within the year 2005. Most urban compulsory schools have special education centers, where students with special educational needs spend time, but all these students belong to general classes (Morthens, 2004). Information is not available on the number of such centers within schools outside Reykjavík.

At the upper secondary school level special classes for students with intellectual disabilities have been on the increase. Over twenty upper-secondary schools have opened up such special classes, mostly within the past five or six years, but these students are new comers in the upper-secondary school population (Althingi, 1996).

A preliminary qualitative study of 6 Icelandic schools, which is a part of a research in progress on the situation of all children and youth with intellectual disabilities in Icelandic schools, from early childhood education (which is non compulsory for children 1–6 years old) through compulsory school (learners aged 6–16) to non compulsory upper-secondary schools (students aged 16–20) has so far shown the following (Marínósson & Bjarnason, 2003):

1. The main problems affecting learners with intellectual disabilities in schools relate to the underlying views (values) within the school itself. The reference is «the normal» and the schools attempt to mend or categorize as special all deviations from that. This applies both to social and learning factors.
2. The schools are too focused on teaching academic subjects. Less demand is made upon learners who do not learn these in the same way as do most learners.
3. Teachers choose their own teaching methods, whether and to what extent they collaborate with others. Some spin their lessons off the cuff, while others follow detailed plans.
4. Transition of students with intellectual disabilities, between school levels or from school to the world of work is seldom prepared by teachers and schools.
5. The school is seen as an institution that is expected to serve learners basic needs for education, but staff does not make adequate use of educational opportunities outside the school; in the family, the community, and in business.

These preliminary findings apply least to our preschool data, but increasingly with the age of the learners with intellectual disabilities, as they progress through the upper grades of the general compulsory schools. At upper secondary school level such students are placed in special classes of the general school (Marínósson & Bjarnason, 2003). Consequently many of those students seemed to be in school but not a part of their class, or the school or the school community in the same way as non labeled peers.

The third response to the reform strands
As students with disabilities move into ordinary classrooms, they bring a new dimension to student diversity. As a consequence of the first and the second shifts (school diversity and fewer specialized segregated educational settings), the third is a shift in the role and daily duties of special educators, from self-contained special class teachers to a variety of specialists roles; the support specialist, the resource expert, the consultant who works as
much or more with adults (general teachers, pedagogues, teacher aides, parents and bureaucrats) providing services or resources on demand. These changing roles of more and more special educators (and to some extent they are also true for general educators) pose new challenges for teachers and schools, and for teachers and academics in higher education, both general — and special teacher training, and within the educational research community. Some of these challenges are discussed at the end of this paper.

Next, the paper outlines briefly how disability studies can provide theoretical tools that are relevant to teachers and special education professionals in bringing about the full active membership of all learners in school and the school community.

**Disability studies and their relevance to special education professionals**

Inclusive education is, as mentioned above, the law in Iceland since the education Acts of 1995 and 1996 (Althingi, 1995, 1996) and in the non-compulsory early childhood education sector since 1994 (Althingi, 1994). This legislation ties in with the Salamanca Declaration from 1994.

Theoretically the term inclusive education is not used to indicate a placement or a goal, but inclusive and exclusionary processes embedded in the organization of schools and school cultures, and affecting both marginalized non-disabled and disabled students’ learning and their school and school community participation (e.g. Booth, 1995; Dyson, 1997; Barton, 1999; Bjarnason, 2004). Inclusive schooling calls for new teacher roles, teaching and learning, organized for mixed ability heterogeneous student groups, collaboration, flexibility, and organizational and administrative systemic change (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

The alternative to inclusive schooling, is the more widespread view, of traditional, segregated, individualized, training and treatment orientated special education, embedded within the individual, medical model of disability, in the positivistic tradition (see Marinósson 2002; Bjarnason 2004). Most certified special educators in Iceland are either trained within the individualized medical model tradition, or in the case of recent graduates (with post graduate diploma or master degrees) subjected to a mixture of both perspectives (Marinósson, 2004). This approach equips teachers to work with individual students or small groups of students who are seen to have similar problems or deficits, and it tends to focus on individual student problems and deficits (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994). Disability studies provide teachers and special educators with emancipatory tools to view the student, his or her strengths and weaknesses in a broader social context (Barton, 1997).

**What is (social) disability studies?**

Disability, as it is used in this paper is neither a disease nor a damage of the human body. On the contrary, it is a complicated and multidimensional socially constructed concept. The meaning given to disability and difference may vary considerably within a particular culture and its historic period (Kirkebæk, 1993), and between cultures (Ingstad & Whyte, 1995) and is related to forms of social organizations and domains in time and space.

Disability studies, in this sense, have a broad and diverse base in the practical experiences of disabled people, and in diverse academic fields such as history, sociology, cultural studies, literature theory, law, public policy, and ethics. What unites disability studies is thus neither one coherent academic field, nor a body of theory or other such
academic tools, but the claim that the field and its work should be relevant to the practical interests and experiences of disabled people, and further (academic) understanding of the social construction of disability and of disabling conditions and structures. This is very problematic and poses questions beyond the scope of this paper, such as what unites disability studies, given its diverse academic basis and the diversity of people with disabilities themselves.

To complicate matters even further, disability studies uses at least two major conflicting versions of a social model of disability; an emancipatory neo-marxist materialism that makes distinction between impairment of the body and disability which is seen as a social product (Oliver & Barnes, 1998; Shakespeare & Watson, 1995), and a progressive social constructionism that view all interpretations of bodily, intellectual or behavior variations as theory-laden, socio cultural phenomena (Bjarnason, 2004). Each of these two approaches contains a variety of different theoretical perspectives and definitions (Altman, 2001; Gabel, 2001).

As disability studies have taken shape in the last decades of the 20th century, the so-called social model of disability has been at its center. Following Gable (2001), one can argue that there are in fact several social model stances that can be located within the social model of disability and that more are added each year.

Teachers do of course not need to get into all the ins and outs of the debates in the field, but it is argued in the next section, that the field’s contribution to teachers’ and special teachers’ work and study in the new landscape of inclusive schooling can provide a powerful tool for viewing disabled students as valued and important members in the context of the school and community.

**How can disability studies be relevant to the practical concerns of (special) educators?**

Disability studies locate the challenge of disability within the system of teaching and learning and the organizational frame and the culture of the school, rather than within the individual student with disabilities. This poses challenge to teachers, especially special teachers trained to work with individual students or small groups of students who all share a disability label. Marinósson (2002) showed in a recent long term ethnographic study of one compulsory mainstream school in Iceland, how the school was found to produce a variety of special educational needs through the construction of students diversity:

> Several influencing factors were found to contribute to this practice, including the values of acceptable behaviors, the nature of knowledge, ethics, and the bureaucratic structure of the school and the professional interests of the teachers. ... Counteracting factors, for example principles of equality and rights of due process. (Marinósson, 2002, p. 2)

Instead of changing its organizational approach to teaching and learning, this school was found to solve its dilemmas by sending students who were seen to have learning, behavioral or other such «problems» to special education (Marinósson, 2002).

The inclusive school strives for the opposite. It attempts to merge the general and the special education practice:

> into one unified system, that incorporates all children and youth as active fully participating members of a school community; that views diversity as the norm; and that ensures a high-quality education for each student by providing meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports for each student. (Ferguson, 1995, p. 286)
Disability studies, it is argued, can provide teachers, special teachers and schools with a useful perspective with which to view its most vulnerable students, by shifting the focus away from students’ deficits, incapacities and faults, to that of fully human children and youth with abilities, talent and needs. The new focus then invites new teacher roles and practices and new or adapted organizational structures and evaluation methods. There is no one-way of approaching this.

Scholars who have studied inclusive practices in order to help teachers have suggested that flexibility in school organization (including in the organization of teaching and learning), and a collaborating community of teachers set on making their schools better and more efficient places for teachers and learners, could be a way to start (Ferguson, Ralph & Meyer, 2001; Ainscow, 1995; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Giangreco, 1997; Wearmouth, 2001; Tetler, 2000).

But most students of inclusive practices agree that, starting with the will to address the challenge to include all learners, is necessary but not sufficient to ensure the desired outcomes of equity and quality education for all (e.g. Clark, Dyson, Millward & Skidmore, 2001). The emancipatory perspective of disability studies, can and does in my experience sharpen that will, and provide some insight into how and what to try.

Teachers do not create the schools; they are placed within a pre-existing organization, framed by laws, traditions and other persons’ practices. Schools are very resistant to change due to both their organizational complexity, teachers professional practices, and because schools are embedded in a wider complex local and national education systems. This is clearly shown in many studies of schools trying to become more inclusive (e.g. Clark, Dyson, Millward & Skidmore, 2001; Marinósson, 2002).

No one teacher changes systems. But a single teacher, or as Ferguson and her colleagues point out; «a mixed ability group of teachers», each with different specialties to contribute to the teaching of a very diverse group of learners who unite in a single multi-talented teaching corps can, make a difference in the lives of his or her students, his or her professional colleagues, and sometimes in the lives of students’ families (Ferguson, et al., 2002). With the help of disability studies, it is argued, teachers can cut the cord between impairment and disability, and between education and treatment.

The Voices of Three Special Educators

Next, we will look at how three special educators, two from general compulsory education schools and one from an upper secondary school explain their work. The examples presented here are drawn from interviews with twelve special and general education teachers who worked with disabled students mostly in general education schools. Most had had to shift their teaching roles from that of a traditional special educator (or special class teacher), into some kind of inclusion facilitator or special education director (Bjarnason, 2004). The three examples illustrate some of the special educators’ roles, tasks, concerns and interpretations, related to their work with disabled students who are placed within two general education compulsory schools and one typical upper-secondary school, all of which are primarily operated for non-disabled students.

The Clinical Expert

Sævar, was employed as a special educator, but he was trained as a developmental therapist (as a professional specialized in working with disabled people), but had added on some in-service teacher training. He had a
wide experience in working with disabled children, youth and adults for 26 years, and was pulled in to plan and carry out special education in a compulsory school in a mixed urban and rural area. He was responsible for the special education of 64 students in mainstream settings. Another part of his task was to create a special department for 10–12 disabled children and youth.

Disabled students were accepted into the special department when parents applied for a placement. Then, followed a series of meetings; with parents, the principal and assistant principal, former teachers or pre-school teachers, and experts from the local social service and the local education offices. Paperwork, including medical and psychological assessment and test results, was examined and used for planning. The school psychologist was always involved in admittance. Parents played a major role both in the admittance process and in planning and adapting their child’s education in school and community participation. Sævar said:

Parents must choose to place their child with us. That is a must. The parents have a choice. I noticed ... that the strongest parents demanded most from us on their children’s behalf. Maybe those parents had the ability to say: El want my child to have some other option than the special class. Parents who were not so strong socially did not have this...the [guts] to fight for their child. Don’t misunderstand me, I am not saying that the special class is a bad option, but frequently a better solution could have been found if the parents had been stronger.

Each disabled student had an IEP (Individual Education Plan). After the initial meetings with parents, experts and relevant teachers an IEP was written, where objectives and goals were carefully described. Some of the parents were very influential in forming the goals and subsequent education plans for their children, but others accepted passively the teachers IEP’s and other plans. Sævar also planned inclusion of disabled students in typical classes and used art and craft classes and sports. He also planned the disabled students’ participation in the school’s extra-curricular social life. Disabled students who spent some or most of their time in general classes were equipped with work projects from the special department. Sævar:

We had many severely handicapped learners. They got appropriate study materials to suit their ability, as did others in the [general] classes...They had Icelandic when the others had Icelandic, and math when the others had math, just suitable tasks for them.

Sævar described how he equipped the disabled students who were partly or largely in typical classes, and how he found it a problem not to be able to send support persons in with them to all lessons. He found that some of the disabled students had problems adjusting to a special class and being accepted there.

It was difficult to find general teachers willing to include the students from the special department. Sævar explained:

[A few years ago] the problem was that [general] teachers were afraid to take our kids. I felt that many teachers were really terrified. They found it difficult to have the paraprofessional persons in their classes, they wanted just to be left alone with their class. We talked about this [to the principal] after three years of struggle. We did not want to have to go down on our knees in front of teacher after teacher, in order to beg them to accept our students...We were forced to do this [at first] and in the end we found ourselves always turning to the same [general] teachers who were open and made sure that our kids were a part of their groups.
Sometimes when a general teacher accepted disabled students into the class, he saw it as the special teacher's responsibility to deal with their education.

Sævar: There were instances, when we managed to get one of our students into a class, but the teacher did not feel responsible. He [the disabled student] was allowed to be there, but he was not one of his...

Sævar explained a positive political will to support all the disabled students from the school district in the school. Money and space were made available. Sævar: There was may be no ideology behind this [special department] when it started, - and now, I don't know [about the ideology] it is difficult to say anything about that now. I don’t think the principal and the school administration have got hold of any particular ideology, because for a time this [the special department] was a school within the school. As long as we did not knock on their doors, and as long as nobody complained about us, they simply let us get on with it.

In this school, the special teacher, supported by experts, used his own judgment as to who should be included in typical classes, where, when and how often, and who should be placed solely in special classes. Strong parents could influence such decisions. However, disabled students, who had less involved parents, and who made extensive use of the local special social service system, worried Sævar. A few of the most significantly disabled students were moved from one type of services to the next on a daily or weekly basis. One of his students had according to him, more or less «lived in a suitcase for the past three years». Sævar:

Imagine, when we send them off ... some get on the bus to spend the week end at the respite home, or unfamiliar women come to pick them up [for the support families], or a support person comes to bring them to a different place in town to wait for their parents ... Things change constantly for some of them...these kids are unbelievably adaptable. But of cause, I don't always know how they are feeling. It is not easy to read the modes of the most disabled kids..

Sævar was deeply committed to his students' well being. What was unique in his department was that there, no one was turned away from the school, no matter how significant his or her impairment. The focus was to keep every student in school, close to his or her home, include and teach those who were seen to benefit from that, but take care of and train those who were seen to belong in closed special classes. Students seen to be in the middle were served some of both. Sævar's concern, like that of some of the other special teachers, was directed to how to get more general teachers to cooperate with him in including labeled students into general education classes.

The Inclusion Expert
Sigrún has worked in compulsory schools for 25 years, teaching general compulsory school students and learners with special needs for 12 years. She has a background in working with disabled people, and she recently finished her degree in special education. She works in a medium sized compulsory school in a rural town and has been one of the pioneers of inclusive education in her district. Currently, she is the director of special education at her school. In this role, she helps teachers and paraprofessionals, who work with three students labeled with significant disabilities in mainstream classes.

She «provides information about disabilities to general teachers and non disabled students». She helps those general education teachers who request help to plan and expand the curriculum in order to include disabled students’ educational needs, and to
teach in a cooperative manner in typical mixed-ability classes. She tries to encourage collaboration and mutual consultation between herself and the general teachers at the school. She attempts to meet daily with the teachers and support persons in the classes which include disabled students. Furthermore, she works closely with a team of experts from the local education office, and brings them to the school, to problem solve when she and the general teachers find that necessary.

She also teaches in a class of 10th grade students, where three students have been labeled as having mild intellectual disabilities. Finally she instructs a small group of students, on a regular basis, who have problems with reading. This school does not have special classes, but students labeled with intellectual disabilities are sometimes pulled out of their class for individual tuition in the resource room. When asked about the admission of a new disabled student Sigrún explained:

The class teacher and I met the child in his preschool, and his support person there. We stay there for a morning. That way we get an idea what questions we need to ask. Then we have a number of meetings. We need to - we have tried to meet with as many people together as possible to get a kind of a broad picture ... from the parents, the child's preschool teacher and support persons, from the speech therapist, and physiotherapist...if they are in the picture...

Following such a meeting the preparations start. Sigrún and her colleague decide together what special aids, if any, need to be bought, what alterations have to be made to enable the student access, and they try to do this within a stringent budget of the school. Smaller meetings with the parents or individual professionals follow suit.

Once the student begins at compulsory school, the teachers have already made a rough plan for his schooling. According to the Icelandic Statutory Regulation on Special Education teachers in compulsory education are expected to write IEP's for labeled students and hand them in to their local Educational Authorities (Althingi, 1998). These are then used for estimating costs because of support for such students. Sigrún explained:

Sigrún: We begin to collect information for the IEP as soon as we have met with the parents, but we start writing it when the student has been with us for one or two weeks. We are constantly changing things at first...We try to have the parents as much as possible involved in this work.

Q: How?
Sigrún: We use the plan from Inclusive Curriculum (hence forth IC program designed by an American professor, who visited Iceland a few years ago and taught teachers) It provides a clear process to defined outcomes. Then we refer this to the external advisor, he helps us with the bigger picture. Some of our students follow the IC program, others do not.

It is hard to involve general teachers in using the IC program, but she and two other special educators at the school have weekly meetings with general teachers who are not part of the IC program to try and support them in their work. Here broad goals or individual learning outcomes are defined (in a document of 2–3 pages) from the beginning, and they include academic, behavioral, social and physical outcomes. The outcomes are defined in such a way that teachers can easily collect data on each, which they use for evaluating the results of each student's learning.

There is a continuous focus on finding better ways to reach the broad goals by focusing throughout the year on teaching objectives and how they can be changed so as to better
reflect the class curriculum. Cooperation with parents and experts is built in to this program, and general teachers are enlisted to participate in the inclusion process. Less systematic methods are used in special education in Sigrún’s school, when the cooperation of the class teacher is less forthcoming and they have not joined the IC program.

The work methods in the school have gained support from parents. Sigrún said that the biggest problem with the IC approach is how time consuming the preparation and meetings are, and how some of the general teachers at the school have problems with that. From the point of view of the disabled students, Sigrún is positive about the results, even though she said that the process could be made to work better.

Sigrún: None of our students is socially very weak, but they differ in how much they can give to each other, and how able they are to connect socially with other people.

Q: Y es?

Sigrún: This [disabled] student has many good friends in his class. His personality is such that it is easy to love him, and his classmates really do love him. They make sure that he takes part in everything that is going on, and show interest in what he is doing. He is the kind of student who really belongs in an inclusive class, even though he is a really difficult student.

Q: But?

Sigrún: But we also have [disabled] students who pinch and even bite. ...A student who does not know how to behave, he will always be difficult. Luckily, we manage to tone such behavior down... We put a lot of emphasis on helping them to shape their behavior.

Sigrún is the only teacher in the sample who works systematically at inclusion with part of her colleagues and their students Some of the other general teachers in her school do not follow her IC program on inclusion, but work in their own way with labeled students and receive supports for that from Sigrún and her colleagues. Because this school accepts that teachers have different ideologies and different approaches to teaching and learning, its’ organizational structure is flexible, and school administrators encourage cooperation between likeminded teachers and teacher initiative.

Creating an Oasis in the Midst of the School

Þorsteinn also works in a small country town. He has been a teacher for 25 years and, like Sigrún, he added to his skills by obtaining a diploma in special education. He too has taught students at all levels of the compulsory educational system, and has worked as a special educator in a vocational department for young disabled adults. Now he has been promoted to the director of a special education department in a medium sized upper secondary school. Þorsteinn built the department from scratch and is very proud of his work. His approach to special education is almost directly opposite from that of Sigrún’s.

Þorsteinn is concerned that his students share ordinary facilities at the school, and that their classrooms in the west wing of the school are similar to other classrooms and open to scrutiny. His dream is to be able to create a more technically equipped individualized special department. Þorsteinn said:

That is what I want to happen. While that has not been done, I am not sure I want typical students to come in here much, into the facilities we have now. ...We need of course better classrooms, a training room and mattresses, and everything that is necessary to provide these kids with the services they need. Further, this should be ... separate, so that the kids are not wronged. They need to be in private.
There are seven students in his department. Most of the students are labeled intellectually disabled, but there are also students with physical and sensory disability labels. The admission process follows a certain defined procedure. Þorsteinn:

Applications must arrive no later than in December the year before [we are to admit the student]. No later and if the student is very different, then we want to know even earlier. We have written to all the compulsory schools in our area and asked them to contact us as early as possible… we always begin by inviting the prospective student and his teacher to come and visit us and see what we do.

Þorsteinn has circumscribed student admission by a set of bureaucratic rules, but he is less keen on paperwork when it comes to planning teaching and learning within the special class. He said that he tries to keep the paperwork and meetings down to a minimum. He asks the previous schools for a profile of each new student’s work in advance. Further he asks for; «whatever information they think we need about the student’s personality, behavior and such».

He does not believe in writing IEP’s, and is not compelled to do so at upper secondary school level. Þorsteinn said:

We do not use IEP’s. I will say it here very clearly. My main goal, and that is what I tell the teachers who come in here to work...my main goal is that the students feel good with us...I don’t want to push the students into doing what they do not want to do... If I have to choose between being able to point at top progress in education, or less progress, but that the student feels good with us, I select the latter. I am sure it gives these students allot, just to be a student in this school.

Parents are invited to a meeting as a part of the admission process just before school starts. But in general, parents are not encouraged to participate much in the day-to-day schoolwork. Þorsteinn:

They come with the students in the beginning, clarify a few things, talk about what ever is on their minds, or about the things we ask about. Then of course, they can contact me if they want to and...I meet the parents with their kids, at least once a term, and then we may talk on the phone...

Individual students are given different tasks to do in class, different course material, aimed at their abilities, they may all sit together and study the same subjects, or they may work in a couple of groups. Sometimes a few typical students are invited to come into the department as helpers. They are paid for this by getting one or two extra credits, depending upon how many hours a week they give to such supports. The teachers evaluate the student’s performance while teaching, and give them their results in the form of numbers on a scale from 0 to 10, as the Upper secondary school law prescribes, accompanied by written notices. Þorsteinn explained:

They [the students] get grades at the end of each term, they are graded with numbers like other students at the school, because they only understand numbers [in grades]. We have an agreement that, that is open and over board. [It is that]... it is forbidden to grade anyone below 5 [on a 0-10 scale a grade below 5 means that the student has failed a test]. People are not allowed to fail here. Then each teacher [in the special classes] decides how high he is prepared to go and what he thinks reasonable.

This teacher likes to have control over his department. He selects carefully what general teachers do in the department, and he is dedicated to his work with disabled students.
Þorsteinn is focused on his procedure and structure. He has worked hard to gain admission and acceptance for himself and «his students» in the school, where book learning and academic abilities are highly rated. Once a disabled student has been admitted, Þorsteinn, focusing on «making the students feeling good», protects individual students in a paternalistic way.

The somewhat astonishing window dressing of giving students grade marks, that everyone knows are not based on formal exams and competition like those of non-disabled students at the school, is a clear indication of such paternalism. By keeping his students in the oasis in the school, their access to the school community, and former classmates and friends was restricted, as was their opportunities to form broad relationships with typical peers.

These, and the other teachers in the research were picked by their disabled students as being good, caring teachers (Bjarnason, 2003). They were all praised within their schools as being forward looking, energetic, hard working and dedicated to their students. Teachers chose their vocation because they like to be with their students. They are challenged by helping their students to learn, and rewarded by each student’s achievement, big or small. The three teachers quoted above, found however that much of their time was taken up by paperwork, meetings inside and outside the school, attempts to collaborate with colleges who in many instances were not too keen to do so, and to work with parents, outside experts and even the social service system.

Two of the teachers, Sigrún and Sævar did their utmost to fulfill these obligations, working many evenings and week-ends. The third, Þorsteinn, a traditional special educator, worked hard as well, but tried to keep the paperwork and the collaboration to a minimum. In stead he used his time to teach his students individually, and supervise the general educators whom he had persuaded to come and work in the special department. All three teachers were innovative in their shifting roles. They had not been prepared, in their teacher training, for the part of their job that involved all the paperwork, the support of other teachers, and the meetings and cooperation other adults; parents, teachers, specialists, administrators and so forth.

Þorsteinn liked to focus on the individual student, and the task at hand; to correct, teach, train and protect his students. He emphasized the importance of getting his students (with significant disabilities) into general upper secondary school and had staked his career on that effort. Sigrún and Sævar, who both had background in working with disabled people, struggled hard to get their students both a quality education and necessary supports, within the generic school, to the extent they deemed possible. Yet both spent considerable time administering tests to assess their students’ deficits. Their methods differed, but their goals were similar; to help each student to benefit both academically and socially. What is perhaps most striking from the teachers’ stories, even though none of them mentioned it, and that is the loneliness and lack support they experienced in their jobs.

**Lessons learnt – special educators or inclusion specialists?**

What is the relevance of all this for teacher education? By tying together the responses to the three strands of school reforms including the conclusions from the preliminary qualitative study summarized above, and the experiences, perspectives and concerns, reflected in the teachers voices, I argue that teacher education, both general – and special
education programs at pre-service and in-service levels need to change. If the aim is to equip all teachers to work with all students in inclusive settings, as is stated in the law and government policy, general educators should be skilled in working flexibly together, and with a heterogeneous group of students and adults.

In addition, special educators, who in Iceland as in many other European countries, share the basic training of general education teachers, need to add to their learning both an understanding of the new disability studies and adapt the more traditional special education skills, so that they become more applicable in general schools and typical classes. The lessons listed below are derived from the data and arguments presented above. If schools need to change, in order to provide all children and youth with excellent and appropriate education, then basic teacher training and post graduate training in special education, need to change too. We could start by reflecting seriously on these lessons, and apply them in reinventing our own university teacher training courses at in-service, pre-service and postgraduate levels, and both in theoretical and practicum courses.

The lessons for higher education teacher training are

(1) We need to acknowledge that the «norm» does not exist neither regarding students learning nor their social situation, and gear all teacher training, both pre-service and in-service training to that. General and special education should not be taught separately, and all general teachers should be trained to work in each and every subject and lesson, with heterogeneous groups of students who are seen to have a variety of abilities, needs and interests.

(2) Each and every student has the right to be respected, valued as he or she is, and become an active learning member of his school and school community. Disability studies can help forge such vision and practice regarding students who look or behave significantly different from most other students. Thus all student teachers should have some introduction to that focus.

(3) We need to prepare and equip all student teachers, so that they are able to pool their expertise, and collaborate in planning, teaching and evaluation, so that a team of mixed ability group of teachers is able to work with all students (see Ferguson, 1995; Ferguson, et al., 2002).

(4) The training of traditional special educators should be replaced by the training of «inclusion experts». Such training should include training in working with adults.

(5) The inclusion expert should learn to focus both on the individual learner, his or her abilities, interests, deficits and needs, and on the school organization and the learners’ community context.

(6) The «inclusion expert» should learn how to deal with practical matters regarding students’ learning and their social participation, as individuals and in groups. This implies a greater emphasis upon pedagogy and training and the importance of valorization in social context (the social model of disability), less on psychology and medicine (the individual, medical model).

Points four to six do not imply that the «inclusion expert» should not learn and use some of the traditional special education subject, such knowledge can be of utmost importance for their disabled learners. However such knowledge for example knowledge of the workings of the human body should be mitigated in terms of the context.
of individual students aptitudes in the context of the school, the family and the community.

Conclusion

The article has sketched some of the changes that affect our Icelandic schools in the early 21st century, and outlined three strands in education reforms that aim at improving schools in the new millennium. These strands are currently challenging Icelandic teachers and schools as student groups become more and more diverse and heterogeneous in looks, culture, behavior, socio-economic class, religion, ability and needs. The influx of students with disability is seen by some teachers as the ultimate challenge, particularly if their behavior is disturbing and different from that of most students.

Schools that focus on the existence of a «norm» which is given both numerical and a moral value, tend to farm different or «deviant» students out to experts: special teachers, psychologists and therapists of all kinds, so that these students can either be «mended» and brought closer to the «norm», or removed more or less from general classes. Special educators trying to deal with this while at the same time trying to keep their «different» students within the class or at least the school are caught in very unclear and conflicting roles for which they were not prepared for in their training. I argue that some understanding of disability studies may help focus their old special education learning in a new way for the emancipation of both these teachers and their learners.

This is only on step on the way. We need to change our schools and our teacher training so that the special and the general education practice can be merged and rest on teachers groups, where different specialists pool their resources, and work together, in a variety of ways helping all children to learn, help each other, find friends and activities that matter to them. That is the ultimate challenge to our teachers, our schools and to us in higher education as teacher trainers and researchers.

Notes

1 The interviews are taken from a qualitative research based on interviews with 36 young disabled adults, some of their parents, friends and teachers, on the meaning of young disabled adulthood (Bjarnason, 2003, 2004).
2 Heimili og skóli: Landssamtök foreldra www.heimiliogskoli.is/ [Home and school: National organizations of parents]
3 Non of this is new or unique to Iceland. Similar trends are reported by many other researchers in Iceland and abroad (Mýrdal, 2004; Person, 2003).

Literature

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