Three Developmental Tasks for Inclusive Education: An In-Depth Qualitative Study of three Academic Secondary School Teachers in Vienna, Austria.

Judith 't Gilde[1] and Anke Wegner

Abstract

In 2007, Austria ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, committing to the implementation of an inclusive education system, including at the academic secondary school level. A common model in Austria is the integration class, which includes a subject teacher, students with and without special educational needs (SEN), and a SEN teacher. Teaching in such settings poses specific developmental challenges for teachers. The concept of developmental tasks, introduced by Havighurst (1948), originally referred to stages of personal development throughout life. Hericks (2006) adapted this framework for early-career teachers, identifying four key tasks: (1) developing professional competence, (2) transferring knowledge effectively, (3) recognizing student's otherness, and (4) interacting within the school system. Other research about the developmental tasks of pre-service teachers show that developmental tasks are embedded in a context of practice and experiences, differ per student and cannot be predicted (Kraler, 2012; Ostermann, 2015; Author, 2020, 2021). This qualitative study reconstructs the developmental tasks for inclusive education of three subject teachers (N=3) working in integration classes at academic secondary schools in Vienna, Austria. In a first step we interviewed twelve teachers from three schools offering integration classes and we did 18 hours of observation. To select and reconstruct the three cases we followed the steps and criteria of the documentary method (Nohl, 2012). Firstly, we listened to all twelve interviews and wrote down the topics for each interview in chronological order in a table. In a second step we reformulated the twelve interviews by showing in detail the thematical structure and summarising the topics. Thirdly, we selected three individual cases. Our aim was not statistical generalisation but the development of theory-informed, context-sensitive insights. The documentary method involves multiple levels of analysis, is time-intensive and demands dense, narratively rich material. Therefore the selection resulted in three cases which were selected through theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1996), using the strategy of maximization and minimization of differences (Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Kelle & Kluge, 2010). Fourthly, we applied the last step of the documentary method which is the reflecting analysis. We reconstructed three developmental tasks for inclusive education: (1) addressing diversity and the participation of all at pedagogical and didactic level; (2) cooperating with others; (3) acknowledging and promoting inclusive education in schools. The findings imply that for inclusive education, teacher education and professional development initiatives must move beyond technical training and actively engage teachers in critical reflection on their professional identity and beliefs regarding diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, fostering genuine collaboration between subject and SEN teachers requires not only personal commitment but also supportive organizational structures, such as dedicated planning time and shared

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[1] Corresponding author: j.t.gilde@vu.nl

responsibilities. Inclusive education requires that teachers have a clear understanding of what inclusive education entails. Inclusive education is a systemic responsibility which should be embedded and supported in everyday teaching by all teachers, rather than being a specialist concern.

Key Words: Inclusive Education, Professional Development, Developmental Tasks, Biographical Approach, Secondary Education, Case Studies.

Points of Interest

- **Austria's commitment to inclusive education**
  By signing and ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and 2008, Austria has pledged to make its education system inclusive. This commitment extends to all levels, including secondary schools.
- **The study context**
  This research focused on integration classes in academic secondary schools in Vienna, Austria. These classes consist of a subject teacher, regular students, up to five students with special educational needs (SEN) and a SEN teacher.
- **Research focus**
  This study explored the challenges faced by subject teachers in integration classes and examined how they dealt with them in their daily teaching practice.
- **Key areas for teacher development**
  This research identified three essential areas for professional growth in relation to inclusive education among subject teachers working in integration classes:
  o addressing diversity and the participation of all on a pedagogical and didactic level;
  o cooperating with others;
  o acknowledging and promoting inclusive education in schools.

Introduction

Austria ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008, committing to inclusive education as outlined in Article 24 (UNCRPD, 2006). Following this, the National Action Plan on Disabilities (NAP) 2012–2020 aimed to promote inclusion across education systems. Measure 127 of the plan emphasized expanding integration classes in Austria's lower academic secondary schools (AHS) (Bundesministerium Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz [BSGPK], 2012). These integration classes, Austria's dominant inclusion model, typically have around twenty students, including five to seven students with special educational needs (SEN), and are taught by a subject teacher and a SEN teacher (Buchner & Proyer, 2020).

Despite the introduction of the NAP 2022–2030, which includes further goals for enhancing the inclusion and academic success of SEN students in secondary education (BSGKP, 2022), the implementation of inclusive education remains uneven across Austria. In 2016 inclusive education was introduced into all

bachelor curricula of secondary school teachers' training (Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Pickl, 2016). In practice it means that those trained before 2016 have received little to no formal preparation for inclusive teaching (Pickl, 2016; Buchner & Proyer, 2020).

International studies confirm that many teachers feel unprepared for inclusive classrooms (e.g., Ledoux & Waslander, 2020; Schwab, 2019; Rosenberg et al. 2023; Struyf et al., 2019). As teachers confront these unfamiliar and complex demands, they often experience professional developmental tasks: challenges that stimulate reflection, learning, and change. While research has explored such developmental tasks during the early stages of a teaching career (e.g., Hericks, 2006; Kraler, 2012; Ostermann, 2015; Author, 2018), little is known about how experienced subject teachers engage with developmental tasks in integration classes. Moreover, no studies to date have examined the professional development of AHS subject teachers working in integration classes in Austria, despite their central role in realizing inclusive education. A review by Van Mieghem et al. (2020) notes that most research focuses on teacher attitudes and initial training, with a lack of in-depth qualitative studies on the ongoing professionalization of teachers in inclusive contexts.

This study addresses this gap by reconstructing the developmental tasks of three subject teachers working in integration classes in Vienna in 2014, a time when inclusive education was not part of teacher training curricula. Although the data were collected a decade ago, the findings remain highly relevant given the persistence of integration classes and ongoing international efforts to implement inclusive practices, for instance in countries like the Netherlands, which ratified the UNCRPD more recently.

Definition of inclusive education

Inclusive education remains a contested concept, implemented differently worldwide (Armstrong et al., 2011; Ainscow, 2024; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Shyman, 2015; Soan, 2018). For the purposes of this study, we adopt UNESCO's definition of inclusive education as "a process of strengthening education systems to reach all learners by removing barriers to participation" (UNESCO, 2017; IIEP-UNESCO, 2019). This definition encompasses several key principles. First, inclusive education extends beyond children with disabilities. Second, it is grounded in principles of participation and transformability: an approach that challenges deficit-based views of learners and emphasizes the need for contextual adaptation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Ainscow, 2024). Third, as Ainscow (2024) emphasizes, inclusive education requires special attention to groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement.

Terminology in the Austrian context

The conceptual complexity of inclusive education is particularly evident in Austria, where terminological confusion persists. The term "inclusive education" is frequently used interchangeably with "integration", stemming from the 1996 Austrian UNESCO committee's German translation of the Salamanca Declaration, where "inclusion" was translated as "integration" and "inclusive schools" as "integrative Schule" (Biewer, 2010).

To maintain clarity in this study, we distinguish between these concepts while acknowledging their interconnected nature in Austrian practice. We use the term "integration classes" when referring to the specific Austrian educational structure, as this reflects the official terminology used in Austrian schools. However, we recognize that integration, as traditionally conceptualized, differs from inclusive education as defined above. Integration often focuses on placing students with disabilities in mainstream settings without necessarily transforming the educational system to accommodate all learners' needs.

As our research demonstrates, practices within integration classes exist along a continuum: ranging from genuinely inclusive approaches that embody UNESCO's definition to more exclusionary practices that merely co-locate students without removing systemic barriers to participation.

Teachers and inclusive education

Inclusive teaching requires rethinking traditional didactic and pedagogical approaches. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2022) highlights four core values for inclusive teachers: valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, collaboration, and continuous professional development. These values align with the concept of inclusive pedagogy, which shifts focus from "most learners" to all learners, promoting flexible environments rather than categorizing students by ability (Florian, 2013; Florian, 2015; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010;). Inclusive pedagogy involves the ability to respond to a diversity of needs. "It is in the ways that teachers respond to individual differences, the pedagogical choices they make and how they utilise specialist knowledge that differentiates inclusive practice from other pedagogical approaches" (Florian, 2015, p.15). In other words, inclusive pedagogies are commonly understood as a set of strategies designed to promote access to learning for all students.

However, a recent review of inclusive pedagogies shows that most studies about inclusive pedagogies have been carried out in primary classrooms (Koutsouris, 2023). In comparison, the secondary school curriculum is typically subject-centred rather than pedagogy-driven and the pressure is high to finish the curriculum in order for students to succeed at their tests (Schwab et al., 2022). Inflexible school curriculum and exam pressures can cause tensions with regards to using inclusive pedagogies (Adu-Boateng & Goodnough, 2022). This gap underscores the need to explore how inclusive pedagogy is, or isn't, practiced in secondary schools.

Despite a growing body of research on inclusive education and teaching in Austria, studies focus primarily on teacher attitudes or self-efficacy beliefs in primary schools (Gebhardt et al., 2011; Schwab, 2014; Schwab et al. 2017), teamwork (Gebhardt et al., 2015) and inclusive teaching during corona (Letzel-Alt et al., 2022; Möhler & Prummer, 2023). Those studies are all, except for one, quantitative. The study of Gebhardt et al. (2015) is relevant as it took place in secondary schools and shows that there is an organizational problem of inclusive settings especially at secondary education level such as flexible timing of units of instruction and team meetings. Minimal attention has been paid in research to inclusive education at secondary school level in Austria, and particularily to professional learning processes. Mieghem et al. (2020) confirm that qualitative research on the ongoing development of secondary teachers in inclusive settings is largely absent.

Professionalism, Bildung and developmental tasks

In this study we followed the biographical approach where the teacher and his biography stay at the centre of his or her professionalisation. It is concerned with the question of how, during his or her professional biography, a teacher acquires, stabilises and transforms professional actions and competences typical to the teaching profession (Hericks & Keller-Schneider, 2012). This approach is closely related to *Bildungsgangforschung,* a German research tradition focused on reconstructing educational processes within institutional and biographical contexts (Kunze et al., 2010; Hericks, 2006).

The concept of *Bildung,* central to Bildungsgangforschung, refers to transformative learning that alters one's perception of self and the world (Peukert, 2015). Applied to teaching, it frames professional learning as a response to both internal motivations and external challenges, including contradictions and crises. In

this sense, developmental tasks are key turning points in a teacher's biography (Hericks, 2006; Lechte & Trautmann, 2004; Peukert, 2016; Tosana, 2004).

Research has identified four core developmental tasks for novice teachers: (1) developing competence, (2) mediating knowledge, (3) acknowledging students' otherness, and (4) interacting within the school system (Hericks, 2006). While this model has been influential, other studies stress the unpredictability and contextual nature of developmental tasks (Kraler, 2012; Ostermann, 2015). Wittek (2013, 2015) extended Herick's model to inclusive schools but assumed all teachers follow the same developmental tasks. Author (2018, 2020, 2021) emphasised the biographical specificity of developmental tasks, particularly in multilingual and inclusive contexts.

Present study

No studies to date have reconstructed the developmental tasks of AHS subject teachers in integration classes even though teachers play a key role in implementing inclusive practices. Moreover, existing research on developmental tasks focuses on pre-service and early-career teachers, neglecting experienced teachers. As teachers are central to inclusive education (Biewer et al., 2015; Forlin, 2012), there is a critical need for research that examines their professional development through the lens of biographical and institutional challenges. This study responds to that need by reconstructing the developmental tasks of experienced subject teachers working in Vienna's integration classes and exploring how these tasks relate to inclusive education. Therefore the question central to this study is: Which developmental tasks do subject teachers working in integration classes in AHS in Vienna, Austria have and how can these be related to inclusive education?
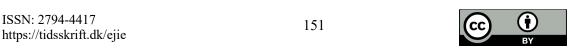
Methodology

This research is a case study: it is an in-depth, up-close inquiry into a specific, real-world and complex, contemporary world phenomenon (Orum, 2015, p. 202; Yin 2015, p. 194). By selecting three cases, and analysing them in detail, the study is a multiple case study (Yin 2015).

Participants and context

The three cases were selected from interviews with twelve subject teachers working in integration classes of AHS as table 1 shows. At the time of data collection in 2014/2015 there were no private AHS schools and four AHS public schools in Vienna which offered a total of seven integration classes at the lower level (first four years). At the fourth school only one interview with the subject teacher took place, observations were not possible.

The study was approved by the research institution and the municipal schoolboard gave authorisation for this research to be conducted in the schools. Active informed consent was obtained from the teachers as well as the parents of the students from the classrooms where observations took place.

Table 1. *Repartition of participating teachers*

School	Subject teachers
1	4
2	4
3	3
4	1
Total	12

The Austrian school system is segregated at the secondary level and there are a range of secondary schools to which a student can apply (Bundesministerium für Bildung, 2016). The AHS lasts for eight years and upon completion students obtain a high school degree which allows them to study at university.

Data collection

The data was collected between September 2014 and September 2015. The topics and sub-topics for the interview were deduced from the literature review. The topics were: teaching; competence; recognition of students; institution; and general questions. In particular the following theories were taken into account: Hericks' developmental tasks and their description (2006); inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Hart et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008;); and the discussions around the meaning of inclusive education (Wilson, 1999, 2000; Lindsay, 2003; Armstrong et al. 2011; Biewer 2010).

The interviews always started with the question of how the teacher started working in an integration class, followed by asking them to tell about their experiences in general in the integration class. The aim of these questions was to create a narrative conversational structure that would evolve around the priorities of the respondents. The ending question of the interview guide has been asked to all interviewees and was formulated as following: "I would like to ask you to imagine that this day is ten years from now: Could you describe me how it would be to teach in an integration or inclusive school or classroom?". This question allowed the interviewees to talk freely about their views of integration and inclusion in a fictional situation. The main idea of the interview was to let the participants narrate which resulted in a great variation of the duration of the interviews: from sixteen minutes to one hour.

Non-participant, unstructured observations of teaching lessons of the participating teachers were done for a total of 18 teaching lessons of which eight were in the first school, five in the second school, and five in the third school. The lessons were spread over a total of eight different subjects which will not be named for anonymity purposes. The aim was to get an idea of what teaching in the integration class looked like at a given moment, and to see if any new elements appeared that did not come up from the interviews. The observations were recorded hand written in a diary and used for the interpretation of the interviews.

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed by applying the documentary method and by following the steps as described by Nohl (2012). Firstly, we listened to the twelve recorded interviews and wrote down the topics for each interview in chronological order in a table. In a second step we reformulated the twelve interviews by

showing in detail the thematical structure and summarising the topics. These first two steps are concerned with the question of what is being said in the text (Bohnsack, 2014a, 2014b; Przyborki, 2004).

Secondly, we selected three individual cases from the broader set of twelve interviews. This decision is methodologically grounded in the qualitative and reconstructive research paradigm, where the aim is not statistical generalisation but the development of theory-informed, context-sensitive insights (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2015). The documentary method involves multiple levels of analysis (Nohl, 2012; Bohnsack, 2010), which is time-intensive and demands dense, narratively rich material. Each case analysis took us a year and resulted in over a hundred pages of data per case.

The three cases were selected through theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1996), using the strategy of maximization and minimization of differences (Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Kelle & Kluge, 2010). This ensured both theoretical relevance and variation within the sample. Selection was based on three interrelated criteria:

1. The extent to which teachers actively worked on their professional developmental tasks,
2. The richness and narrative density of the interview data, particularly the use of metaphorical and reflective language suited for reconstructive analysis (Przyborski, 2004; Bohnsack, 2014a),
3. The diversity in professional experience, allowing comparison across different stages of inclusive teaching practice.

The selected three interviews best fulfilled these criteria. They provided sufficient narrative depth and metaphorical language essential for reconstructing the teachers' professional developmental tasks. The cases of Eva and Mia provided maximum variation in content, while the case of Tom was included to represent a teacher with less experience, yet a particularly metaphor-rich and reflective narrative.

Thirdly, the relevant parts of the interviews from the three cases were transcribed, following the guidelines of "Talk in Qualitative Social Research" (Bohnsack, 2014b, p. 253-255). This meant that for instance intonations, laughs and silences were also reflected in the transcription.

Fourthly, we applied the last step of the documentary method which is the reflecting analysis. It consists of reconstructing the "modus operandi" of a theme or a problem, or the actions in practice and analysing at the semantic level "how" things are being said (Przyborski, 2004; Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2012). For instance by looking at the dramaturgy of the discourse, the metaphors, the positive and negative horizons, the words being used, and the way the discourse is constructed (Przyborski, 2004; Bohnsack, 2010, 2014a; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014).

Interpretations were cross-validated through researcher triangulation, including collaborative interpretation with experienced scholars in the documentary method, to reduce bias and enhance trustworthiness. Moreover, the 18 hours of observation and interviews allowed the principal researcher to enhance her understanding of the context and to look at the integration class and the teacher from different perspectives. So did additional interviews with three directors and five SEN teachers of the participating schools.

Finally, comparing the three cases allowed for methodological triangulation. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced by the internal comparative sequence analysis. This means that during the interpretation the researchers looked for the repetition of regularities within an interview. This is to make sure that a certain perspective of the participant is expressed at different moments in the interview (Nohl, 2012; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014; Yin, 2015, p.99).

Results

The reconstruction of the three cases Eva, Mia and Tom, identified three core developmental tasks essential for teaching in integration classrooms: (1) addressing diversity and the participation of all at both pedagogical and didactic level; (2) developing professional cooperation; and (3) acknowledging and promoting inclusive education within schools.

Addressing diversity and the participation of all at pedagogical and didactic level

The observations and interviews reveal that, in many integration classes, the SEN teacher often assumes responsibility for SEN students, while the subject teacher focuses on the rest of the class. At times, the SEN children even go to another room. Whenever possible, Tom and Mia try to use activities which promote the participation of all. Teaching in inclusive settings, then, requires not only awareness of diversity but also the development of didactic and pedagogical competencies to support it.

Teachers' professional development

Eva's interview contrasts sharply with those of Tom and Mia. She frequently refers to SEN students as "the others" and views inclusive education as unfamiliar "territory" she prefers not to enter. She supports separation, arguing that SEN students work at a different pace and should be in their own room to avoid disruptions: "They use partially completely different teaching materials and we are simply in each other's way. We disturb each other while working so to say on the competences. It makes more sense when they work in their own room."
Although Eva claims she treats all students equally, her narration suggests otherwise. She explains for instance:

> Overall, when they are with me, no difference is made. Except, that I give them shorter turns with reading than the other children, because when they need double the time to read, then of course I lose this time, this I do, but otherwise overall a difference is barely made.

Eva also uses cultural stereotypes to justify assumptions about her students' understanding. Reflecting on a discussion about World War II, she suggests that SEN students might understand it better due to their cultural backgrounds, which she associates with "patriarchal structures" and strong hierarchies. At one point, she even describes the separation between SEN and regular students as "the clever and stupid":
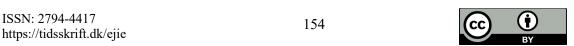
> When [the teacher] says: 'Those are the clever and those are the stupid', but he or she tries to take seriously their personality to stimulate their strengths and the weaknesses […] then I believe, one is already in the right direction.

The passage highlights a contradiction: Eva accepts that a teacher can think that SEN students are stupid, but he or she can then still be a good teacher.
The reconstruction of the cases shows that working in the integration class has contributed to Tom's and Mia's professional development and a change of their didactic and pedagogical perspective. Central to Tom's interview is "education of the heart". He narrates how teaching in the integration class made him aware of the importance of teacher-student relationships in learning:

> This education of the heart is, I don't know, it is such a concept that is difficult to explain, but it is about the contact in the first place. […] Well I have learned in these years, that the contact with students is a requirement for a learning process to be set in motion. […] And for that the integration class was I believe an essential experience.

Tom perceives the integration class as a mini-society, valuing the diversity the SEN students bring. In one example Tom describes how the interaction between the integration class and a bilingual class disrupted the usual classroom dynamics. While bilingual students, mostly from well-educated families, discuss their

vacations abroad, the SEN students, often from lower-income backgrounds, struggle to relate. They do not really understand what the bilingual students are talking about. Tom highlights how the SEN students remain authentic and grounded: "That is for me also a successful matter, when [the bilingual students] can have such experiences. These well brought up, very educated twelve years old. [...] Well it is always about this social question."

Mia, in contrast, rarely distinguishes between SEN and regular students. During observations, she managed the entire class independently, without relying on the SEN teacher. In her interview, she consistently emphasizes participation:

> I look at my subject, at what is possible, if the [SEN student], can participate or if I have to deviate. It happens often, deviations, because when children have big issues with the fine motor skills, knitting and so on, the children will not learn it.

While Tom and Mia integrate inclusive practices into their teaching whenever possible, Eva maintains a binary distinction between SEN and regular students. Truly inclusive teaching requires teachers who move beyond such binary thinking and adopt inclusive language and attitudes. The contrasting orientations of Tom, Mia and Eva reflect different stages of professional development related to inclusive education.

Limitations: institutional constraints versus subjective interests

All three cases reflect a tension between institutional requirements and teachers' personal educational goals which is a central theme in Bildungsgangforschung.

Eva demonstrates a clear preference for traditional secondary academic teaching, explicitly stating this priority four times during her interview: "I have to honestly add that of course eventually I see myself really as an AHS teacher," and later reinforced this position: "I see my primary tasks in the first place to support the AHS children" and "My interests [...] are rather situated in the upper level of secondary school."

Eva's pedagogical approach aligns with her stated preferences. She characterized her teaching methodology as "connected to the old school. It includes relatively much frontal teaching [...] I am very strongly present as a person in the classroom. As a person I am in the foreground." This teacher-centred approach contrasts with inclusive education principles that emphasize student participation and learner-centred pedagogies.

During his interview Tom contrasts "education of the heart", which emphasizes empathy and connection, with traditional "education of the head", focused on academic knowledge. He admits that opportunities for inclusive education are limited. "In my subject there are only a few points of contact. [...] These [SEN students] are mostly extracted. [...] [The special needs teacher] goes out with them." He explains that the opportunities for contact mostly happen during sports. In core subjects, students are frequently taught separately, hindering inclusive practices. By contrast, subjects like sports and arts offer more opportunities for collective participation. For instance, Tom recounts how he encouraged the friends of a girl with a fatal illness to stay by her side when other girls would not and how he explained the meaning of the friendship to them. And two SEN boys in Tom's class earned respect through their football skills. These examples underline the importance of inclusive experiences across all subjects for all students.

Mia recalls being overwhelmed during her first year of teaching when she had to manage both a severely aggressive boy and a girl with intellectual disabilities: "a mentally retarded girl, a boy who was insanely aggressive, he has hit, even bit the director, bit in the finger [...] at that time, there I was overloaded".

She wants to stimulate the participation of all, but she narrates how it does not always work. For instance, Luna, a SEN student, in Mia's class lacks peer relationships and seeks comfort from her teacher.

Tom and Mia have a strong interest in working in the integration class. They aim to foster participation and meaningful interaction among all students. However, they also describe systemic barriers: rigid curricula

in core subjects, pressure to meet standards, limited time and resources, educational fads, and increased workload.

The comparative case analysis reveals two distinct institutional constraints versus subject interests. First, Eva's case demonstrates that inclusive education implementation may be fundamentally compromised when teachers' professional identities and preferred pedagogical approaches are incompatible with inclusive practices. Second, the cases indicate a significant discrepancy between teachers' actual classroom practices and their aspirational goals for inclusive education. This implementation gap suggests that even when teachers possess positive attitudes toward inclusive principles, structural or resource constraints may prevent them from actualizing their pedagogical intentions within integration class settings.

Cooperation with others

Cooperation is a vital developmental task that extends beyond classroom boundaries. Effective collaboration is essential for inclusive teaching (e.g., Booth & Ainscow, 2011; EASNIE, 2022). The case studies show that cooperation with the SEN teacher depends on how teachers perceive their own role in relation to inclusive education and on the possibilities their subject offer for letting SEN and regular children work together. For instance, Eva keeps a clear divide: her primary focus is on the regular students, her collaboration with the SEN teacher is limited to managing disciplinary matters. From Eva's perspective the SEN teacher and her have little in common, each has her own role and priorities. She states: "The task of the SEN teacher here is so to say to take care of the individualisation of her protégées". She also explains at large the difference in education between her and the SEN teacher. There is no cooperation to plan or design the course to promote the participation of all students. When asked how she cooperates with the SEN teacher Eva states: "[Yes, mostly by simply] discussing what I intend to do in my lesson with the regular children and then the integration teacher decides if it makes sense, that she [and the SEN children] are present in this lesson or not."

In contrast, Tom and the SEN teacher decided beforehand to start the integration class together. They are both motivated to cooperate. However, in reality the cooperation is limited as the SEN students are "mostly extracted […]. Common teaching takes place in gymnastics […] or for instance during presentations or when we watch a movie or play theatre together […]. And the planning is not very elaborated."

Mia considers the SEN teacher as an equal: both are responsible for all the students. During the observation one SEN student got upset and did not want to participate. She did not wait for the SEN teacher to act, but handled the situation herself. However, she also highlights organisational restraints: "I am in four teams. It is not always possible [to prepare together]".

The cases reveal a fragmented approach to cooperation. While Tom and Mia express a willingness to collaborate, meaningful cooperation often remains situational and ad hoc, rather than being an integral part of joint pedagogical planning.

Acknowledging and promoting inclusive education in schools

Teaching in inclusive settings implies developing a broader understanding of one's role as a teacher. Not only for individual student outcomes, but also for social cohesion and democratic participation. Key factors here are personal motivation, professional development and a commitment to students' Bildung.

Personal motivation

Teachers' professional development in relation to inclusive education and/or integration differs per case and is motivated by personal experiences and choices. Developmental tasks particularly arise when teachers recognise specific challenges and can no longer continue the way they did before.

Eva perceives the integration class as an external imposition. Her colleague went on maternal leave and she is helping out. During the interview she repeats that it is not her priority, but rather "it is a project, that I am principally prepared to support. […]. It is not that I would now shift my entire time and my interests in this direction. These are rather situated in the upper level of secondary school". As a consequence, no professional developmental process which relates to inclusive education or integration can be reconstructed for Eva.

In contrast, both Mia and Tom have strong personal motivations for teaching in the integration class. Mia's commitment stems from supporting her daughter, who faced severe developmental delays but later excelled academically. This experience shaped Mia's belief in the potential of every student. Tom's interest lies in social justice. He aspired to teach in an inclusive class for seven years before the opportunity arose.

In all three cases motivation to teach in the integration class, or not, and thus to recognise given challenges and engage in inclusive education, is closely linked to how these teachers see their role.

Teachers' role and professionalism

As stated before, Eva sees her main task as teaching the AHS students, especially the upper level. She is focused on preparing them for the exams.
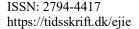
However, Tom and Mia perceive teaching as extending beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. They view the teacher's role as inherently societal: educating future citizens who will both shape and reshape the society they inhabit. This perspective is especially evident in Mia's reflections on her professional responsibilities and her work in the integration class. She emphasizes that the integration setting offers an opportunity for regular students to acquire essential social skills. In her words: "That the [regular] children are simply socially here. That they function as support for someone else, that they can provide help." She elaborates further: "Yes, living together, for one another, [that is] also inclusion. Simply the assistance for children, or people who cannot do it so well." Mia frames inclusion not only as supporting students with special needs but also as fostering a sense of mutual responsibility and solidarity among all students.

However, both Tom and Mia highlight that the possibilities for enacting on their broader educational mission are limited. Tom, in particular, critiques systemic limitations that stifle professional autonomy. By using the metaphor of teachers becoming "robots", he expresses concern that rigid, standardized curricula diminish teachers' creativity and freedom: "My experience is so, […] we are no machines, otherwise, we don't ever need to go in the classes anymore".

Tom's comment underscores a perceived tension between structural conditions and his perception of his role as a teacher, where uniformity and control may undermine relations and adaptive aspects of teaching.

Teachers' role and the relation with inclusive education: the importance of Bildung

It is noticeable that all three teachers do not relate to inclusive education. Eva openly admits that she does not really know what it means, and she argues that because of a lack of money it will end up existing only in the private sector. Mia feels that inclusive education is just a "buzzword", and Tom, likewise, is uncertain about its meaning and predicts that it will be short-lived.

Yet, the reconstruction of Tom and Mia's cases reveals that their perspective about their role as a teacher aligns closely with key principles of inclusive education. In Mia's case, central themes include the transformability of individuals and the participation of all learners. She emphasizes cooperation, mutual respect, and learning to engage constructively with others. Similarly, Tom's notion of "education of the heart" highlights the importance of preparing students for life in a diverse society and fostering essential life skills.

Viewed through the lens of Bildung, both teachers' approaches transcend a narrow focus on academic qualification. They are invested in the holistic development of their students and see schooling as a means of shaping future citizens. In this sense, their work with the integration class contributes meaningfully to the Bildung of all students, resonating with broader aims of inclusive education, even if they do not explicitly identify with the term itself.
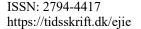
Discussion, implications and limitations

Discussion

This in-depth qualitative research reconstructed the developmental tasks of three subject teachers working in integration classes in academic secondary schools in Austria. The research question of this study was: Which developmental tasks do subject teachers in integration classes in AHS in Vienna, Austria have, and how can these be related to inclusive education? We identified three main developmental tasks.

First, we found the task of addressing diversity and the participation of all at pedagogical and didactic level. The three case studies suggest that when teachers adopt a broad perspective on their role, including responsibility for students' Bildung and their development as future citizens, professional development in relation to inclusive education becomes possible. In other words, Mia and Tom tried whenever possible to use inclusive pedagogies which promote the participation of all. This broader perspective is influenced by teachers' personal experiences and individual processes of Bildung which aligns with Biesta's (2009, 2015, 2022) assertion that teachers must navigate the balance between qualification, socialisation and subjectification. These findings are in agreement with Gheyssens et al. (2020), who found that teachers' underlying beliefs play a crucial role in their ability to adapt teaching to student diversity. Additionally, the reconstruction of the cases suggest that separate SEN provision and fixed curricula limit inclusive practices. Moreover, some subjects, like arts and sports, appear to lend themselves more readily to inclusive approaches than academic subjects such as German and mathematics. Koutsouris et al. (2023) also highlight that the compartmentalised structure of the secondary school curriculum often poses challenges for implementing inclusive pedagogies.

Second, we identified the developmental task of cooperating with others. The three cases show different levels of cooperation between the subject teacher and the SEN teacher, often limited by organisational and structural constraints. This is in line with the study of Gebhardt et al. (2015) which shows that in Austria at secondary school level flexible timing of units of instruction and team meetings prevent the shaping of inclusive settings. Little cooperation is possible when students leave the classroom, whereas through joint instructional approaches and adaptive teaching strategies, effective co-teaching helps prevent the labelling and stigmatization of students by promoting greater opportunities for inclusion within the classroom (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Cramer, 2010). Recent review findings suggest that key factors for facilitating cooperation between regular and SEN teachers include balanced power relations, shared responsibilities, and sufficient time for joint planning (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). Moreover, other studies show that teachers who are worried about implementing inclusive practices mostly assign SEN students to integration aides or teachers assistants, excluding them from participating in regular classroom activities (Blatchford

et al., 2011). In contrast, teachers with positive attitudes towards implementing usually use teaching practices which encourage inclusion in their classrooms (Schwab et al., 2015; Sharma & Jacobs, 2016).

Third, we reconstructed the developmental task of acknowledging and promoting inclusive education in schools. None of the teachers explicitly identified with the concept of inclusive education. This detachment appears to stem from several factors: insufficient information, shifting educational reforms, or the lack of a clear, shared definition of inclusive education: a difficulted highlighted in international literature (Goransson & Nilholm, 2014; Shyman, 2015; Soan, 2018). The absence of a shared understanding of inclusion reflects the challenge noted by Florian (2021), who emphasizes that teacher preparation often fails to position inclusion as a systemic responsibility embedded in everyday teaching. Tom's and Mia's reflections highlight the need for schools and policymakers to trust teachers' capacity for making informed educational decisions. Their call for professional autonomy resonates with concerns about de-professionalization and constrained teacher agency due to rigid curricula and increasing external control (Hargreaves, 2000; Priestley et al., 2015; Sachs, 2016; Terhart, 2011). Similarly, Hendriksen et al. (2024) emphasize that secondary teachers' engagement with inclusive practices depends on their sense of professional agency and the extent to which inclusion aligns with their subject expertise. Their study shows that when teachers lack ownership or structural support, inclusive education risks remaining a peripheral concern rather than an integral part of everyday teaching. In addition, Sannen et al. (2021) demonstrate that teachers' engagement with inclusive practices is reinforced when they are embedded within strong professional networks that foster collaboration and shared responsibility.

Implications

The findings imply that teacher education and professional development initiatives must move beyond technical training and actively engage teachers in critical reflection on their professional identity and beliefs regarding diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, fostering genuine collaboration between subject and SEN teachers requires not only personal commitment but also supportive organizational structures, such as dedicated planning time and shared responsibilities. Inclusive education requires that teachers have a clear understanding of what inclusive education entails. Inclusive education is a systemic responsibility which should be embedded and supported in everyday teaching by all teachers, rather than being a specialist concern.

In general, more research is required about inclusive education in secondary education. Further research could explore the long-term impact of teacher beliefs and identity formation on the success of inclusive practices. More practice-oriented studies in cooperation with teachers are needed on how co-teaching or team teaching could work in secondary schools and on how subject-specific inclusive strategies can be designed and implemented in secondary education.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, a key limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported data from teachers, which may introduce social desirability bias or selective memory effects. While the interviews offer deep insight into participants' perceptions and meaning-making processes, they may not fully reflect actual classroom practices. To mitigate this, observations were conducted and the interviews were designed to be open and reflective, encouraging critical self-assessment, and interviewer neutrality was maintained. However, future research could enrich these findings by triangulating with student perspectives or team feedback.

Second, the three cases have limited generalisability. Our aim was not to provide statistical generalisation but the development of theory-informed, context-sensitive insights (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2015). Each case then shows and is a reconstruction of the structure of a representation of a reality, a practice, an experience. The sample was limited to twelve teachers and then to three, who all volunteered to participate. As such, these findings are not generalisable to all secondary teachers. The cases describe a reality for schools and teachers in a certain context. We have described as transparently as possible how we came to this reality, so that the reader can understand, and so that this research is trustworthy and generalisable to some extent. An important value of this research resides in the fact that it adds to "our comprehension of the reality" (Mus, 2012, p.137).

Third, the documentary method offers an interesting way to reconstruct the habitus of teachers by looking at the metaphors and the words teachers use. For this research we only shared the end results with the teachers. This had to do with the design and the purpose of the research. However, we see potential for the documentary method as a tool to do cooperative research with teachers and to stimulate reflection and discussion. Sharing and exchanging the interpretive formulations with the teachers at an early stage could have offered opportunities for the teachers to reflect on their professional development and for researchers to work in partnership with teachers.

Fourth, a challenge in this research was the fact that we did research about inclusive education in integration classes. Austria is committed to making its system more inclusive and has implemented changes such as adapting the teacher training. From the narrations of the teachers we reconstructed inclusive and integrative practices. The reconstructions showed that there are moments where SEN students participate in a regular classroom activity, but these are limited and mostly not related to core subjects but rather to creative or sport   ones.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the professional trajectories and challenges of subject teachers working toward inclusive education, particularly in the context of academic-track secondary schools in Austria, which are underrepresented in research about inclusive education.

Disclosure statement
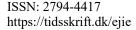
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