

Preparing teachers for inclusive teaching: the Swedish case (A pilot study)

**Girma Berhanu¹ Department of Education and Special Education, Gothenburg
University, Sweden**

Abstract

This article investigates the implementation of inclusive education within Swedish teacher education programmes. Although most programmes include a short module of approximately 7.5 ECTS addressing special education, conflict management, and social relations, little is known about whether—and how—inclusive education is embedded across the core curriculum (Miškolci et al., 2021). Situated within a social democratic welfare state tradition, Swedish education policy has long challenged exclusionary practices, shaping the development of concepts such as normalisation, integration, and inclusion (Beach & Dyson, 2016). Despite this policy foundation, research consistently highlights a gap between inclusive ideals and classroom practice. There is broad consensus that a central condition for realising inclusive education is ensuring that all teachers are adequately prepared to teach all learners (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). To address this issue, the present study examines how the ten principles of effective teacher education for inclusion (Van Peteghem & Consuegra, 2021) are reflected in the curriculum of general teacher education programmes for primary and secondary schools at a Swedish university, and how these principles are interpreted in practice. While the larger research project explores all ten principles, this pilot study focuses on selected dimensions (see the introduction section of the special issue on the grids). Preliminary findings, informed by a literature review and empirical data, indicate that inclusive education is only marginally integrated across subject areas and curricular components. The article concludes by identifying key challenges, opportunities, and tensions involved in preparing future teachers to create inclusive learning environments.

Points of Interest

- Core Research Question: Examines how inclusive education is embedded across the core curriculum of Swedish teacher education programs, not just in specialized, isolated modules.
- Policy-Practice Gap: Highlights a known discrepancy between Sweden's strong inclusive education policy (rooted in social democratic tradition) and actual classroom practice.
- Key Condition for Success: Identifies the adequate preparation of all teachers to teach all learners as a central requirement for realizing inclusive education.
- Preliminary Finding: Suggests that inclusive education is only marginally integrated across subject areas and curricular components, indicating a fragmented approach.
- Contribution: Aims to identify challenges, opportunities, and tensions in preparing future teachers for inclusive practice, focusing on the structural level of teacher education design.

In summary: The study investigates why inclusive education isn't fully realized in schools by looking upstream at teacher training. It finds that despite strong national policies, the preparation is siloed rather than woven throughout the curriculum, which may perpetuate the theory-practice gap.

Key words: Teacher education; Inclusive education; Equity; Core curriculum

¹ Corresponding author: Girma Berhanu girma.berhanu@ped.gu.se

1. Introduction

Much of Sweden's modern history is characterised by collective action driven by a social democratic welfare state. This political and cultural context has provided an early and fertile foundation for critiquing traditional special-educational and exclusionary practices, and for advancing concepts such as normalization, integration, and inclusion (Beach & Dyson, 2016).

Despite this background, numerous studies point to a persistent gap between policy intentions and actual practice regarding inclusion. In Sweden, as in many other countries, teacher education remains high on the policy agenda, particularly with regard to preparing teachers to meet the diverse needs of learners in inclusive classrooms. There is broad agreement among both researchers and practitioners that an indispensable element of inclusive education is ensuring that *all* teachers are equipped to teach *all* students (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020).

Most teacher education programmes in Sweden include a short module of approximately 7.5 credits that covers aspects of special education, conflict management, and social relations. However, we still know relatively little about whether—and how—content related to inclusive education permeates the core curriculum (Miškolci et al., 2021).

The intention with this project is to explore the level of inclusive education components in the curriculum and how teacher educators experience and conceive the teacher education for inclusion (TEI) concept. The project aspires to get answers for the following questions:

- Which TEI competences and content appear in national and local curricula? How do teacher educators define TEI?
- How do teacher educators prepare student teachers for inclusive practice?
- What competences do teacher educators view as essential for inclusive teaching?

The selected programme for analysis is the general teacher education programme for primary and secondary schools at one University. Using document analysis –program goals, curriculum and syllabus etc. – and semi-structured interviews with Program leadership and teacher educators, [For this pilot study one Programme Leader and one Director of Studies are interviewed] we scrutinize how the concept of inclusive education is infused in different subjects and content matters; and translated into learning and teaching practices.

The theoretical framework is anchored in the principles of social justice, equity, and quality education for all. The analytical framework is informed by the Inclusive Education Grid (Van Peteghem & Consuegra, 2021), which will be applied rigorously in the main study. At this stage, my intention is to identify the framework that will be adopted by most contributors to this special issue.

2. Inclusive Education in Sweden

Sweden has long been dominated by a social democratic model of governance in curriculums (Englund 2005). Strong Labor parties have supported general welfare policies since at least the interbellum, with solidarity, community and equality as keywords. There were high hopes that uniform, free-of-charge education for pupils from all social strata would contribute to equality and justice and promote social cohesion. Although belief in education as the main motor of social equity may have waned, education is still regarded in Sweden as one of the main instruments for combatting unemployment, social exclusion and ill health (Barow and Berhanu, 2021). Hence, Sweden's current focus on equitable education echoes the social democratic concept of the state as the people's home (OECD 2015).

Barow and Berhanu (2021) undertake a longitudinal analysis of the development of inclusive education in Sweden from the 1990s to the present. Drawing on research literature and statistical data, they examine three decades of Swedish education policy and practice and identify a pronounced tendency toward the marginalization and segregation of vulnerable student groups. The factors most closely associated with this development include disability, gender, migration background, and socioeconomic status. In relation to inclusion, the authors underscore the persistent discrepancy between political intentions and their practical realization. Although inclusion in education is widely regarded as a fundamental right, they contend that this principle cannot be equated with the existence of genuinely

inclusive educational practices. Considerable and sustained efforts are therefore required to create learning environments that recognize, value, and build upon the strengths of all learners.

McDonald (2013) similarly observes that schools across the Western world are under increasing pressure to raise academic achievement while simultaneously accommodating a growing number of students who may be perceived as “difficult to teach.” Sweden is no exception in this regard. Efforts to advance inclusive education continue to be marked by evident gaps between policy expectations and educational practice (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011).

Changes in the Swedish education system are observable at the levels of not only policy and politics but also practice. Barow and Berhanu (2021) conclude that overall, there are ambivalent tendencies that both strengthen and weaken inclusive education. Swedish national policy documents, such as the Education Act and the curricula, do not contain the term *inclusion*, although they endeavor to adopt an inclusive approach (also Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). The terminological confusion concerning *inclusive education* hampers not only the dialogue between researchers and practitioners but also the communicability of inclusion for a wider audience, such as politicians and the general public. To avoid abuse of the expression *inclusive education*, a more in-depth terminological discussion is necessary. By focusing on the interaction between students and their social surroundings, the terminological development of “inclusive learning environments” can be fruitful.

In this study we do not delve into the conceptual terrains of inclusion, inclusive education or “inclusive learning environments”. We want to use the concept in its broader meaning that Inclusive education is when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighborhood schools to receive high-quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valetti, 2010; Alquraini & Gut, 2012). UNESCO (2000) defines inclusive education as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve Education for All. As an overall principle, it should guide all education policies and practices, starting from the fact that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society. According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education is seen as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education.” The goal is that the whole education system will facilitate learning environments where teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenge and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education approach, learning environments are fostered where individual needs are met and every student has an opportunity to succeed (Florian, 2014).

One might question how inclusive education in Sweden coexists with special education structures that involve small classes and separate schools. This coexistence is not unexpected, as the system has historically shifted back and forth in response to political forces and policy changes. The structure of special education in Sweden, both historically and at present, has been characterized by isolation, segregation, differentiation, and individualization. At the same time, there are promising developments that seek to incorporate differentiation and individualization within regular school settings and mainstream classrooms.

The deficit approach was predominant in the past, and elements of this approach can still be observed today, particularly in studies on disproportionality and the overrepresentation of immigrant students in special education (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012; Reichenberg & Berhanu, 2024; Bel Habib, 2001; Berhanu, 2008). These studies address a broad set of issues that are highly pertinent to contemporary multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious societies. They speak to central debates concerning identity, belonging, inclusion, and the lived experiences of children and young people in increasingly diverse educational environments. Importantly, this body of research engages with the critical question of whether practices within special education risk marginalizing particular groups of students due to prejudice, inadequate assessment procedures, or systemic bias. The studies provide valuable insights into how special education systems can more effectively organize themselves to address inequities related to overrepresentation.

The findings hold significant potential to inform teacher education programmes, which play a vital role in preparing future teachers and school psychologists to navigate the complex cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes today’s classrooms. Moreover, this literature underscores that educational

difficulties may arise from a range of contextual factors, reminding practitioners and policymakers that disability identification cannot be divorced from broader sociocultural dynamics. Although the literature on disproportionality in Sweden remains limited, it is well positioned to contribute meaningfully to ongoing scholarly and professional discussions concerning equity, assessment, and inclusion in special education.

For these to happen we definitely need to prepare future teachers in varied training programs, with the right competences. A meta-analysis of *Initial teacher education for inclusion* by Symeonidou (2017) concludes that making informed decisions about the design of initial teacher education courses and units of study for inclusion depends upon addressing some fundamental issues (i.e. the legacy of special education, and the challenges faced in different regions) and making a balanced and informed assessment of the value of content-infused, single-unit, and school placement/experience approaches. The article discusses the implications of this literature review's findings for future research. The existing research shows that a significant percentage of teachers in most countries have not acquired skills and knowledge required to meet diversity. A number of projects have gathered relevant data on a range of aspects related to effective teacher education and on the nature of meaningful approaches to initial teacher education for inclusion (United Nations Children's Fund 2013) provide data suggesting that a significant percentage of teachers across countries were not educated for inclusion in their initial teacher education courses, and discusses a range of aspects related to effective teacher education. (European Commission 2010; United Nations Children's Fund, 2013). Our ambition in this research is therefore to highlight the problem, identify barriers and suggest solutions on how to bridge the gap.

2.1 Teachers' Preparedness for inclusive education: Policy framework and research

Sweden has long adopted inclusive education as a guiding principle to guarantee equality of access in education to all, embedded in a human rights approach to social relations. Swedish values relate to a vision of an equitable society, including sufficient resources and equal opportunities for all. This vision is concerned with the well-being of all pupils and with making schools welcoming institutions (Berhanu, 2016; Sveriges Riksdag 1985; 2010). Present-day Swedish educational policy also allows for special education classes and schools (Barow and Berhanu 2021). School communities, including special education classes, must be inclusive of all learners regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, creed, gender, or ethnicity. Implied in the national presumption is the contribution that diversity among learners makes to community life. We should however note that the effect of socio-economic background on school achievements has greatly increased since 1990 (Gustafsson and Yang Hansen 2018). Moreover, political ambition has never really matched educational practice (Haug 2017; Isaksson and Lindqvist 2015). Local schools often find policy incentives unrealistic (Emanuelsson, Haug, and Persson 2005), so that the gap between political intentions and practical realities has remained considerable.

In Sweden, despite the earlier findings from the TALIS study (Skolverket 2019), positive attitudes toward the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs are reportedly common. This applies not only to teachers in general but also specifically to physical education teachers (Jerlinder, Danermark, and Gill 2010) and preschool teachers (Engstrand and Roll-Pettersson 2014; Sandberg and Ottosson 2010). Swedish teachers have been shown to hold comparatively favourable views of inclusive education (Helldin et al. 2011), and such attitudes appear to emerge already during teacher training (Takala et al. 2012). However, contrasting evidence has also been presented. For example, studies indicate a lack of support among special needs school teachers for including pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Gidlund 2018). These findings were corroborated by Göransson et al. (2020), who examined the national population of teachers working in schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities. When comparing the attitudes of special needs teachers with those of support teachers, they found that two-thirds of the latter lacked appropriate qualifications, suggesting that the professionalism of special needs teachers places them more in line with inclusive education (Göransson et al. 2020).

In sum, attitudes toward inclusive education are multifaceted, and inclusion itself appears highly context dependent. Nevertheless, Swedish teachers generally seem supportive of inclusion, albeit with reservations concerning certain groups of pupils.

In Sweden, a recent national initiative *Lärarlyftet* ('The Teacher Boost') *Specialpedagogik för lärande* (SFL; Thoutenhoofd et al. 2020) [*Inclusive education in Sweden: A survey of teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and collaboration towards better meeting pupils' learning* (Söderlund et al. 2024)] has been conducted and the research evaluation suggests that three conclusions: (i) attitudes among teachers are, at least in Sweden and on the basis of self-reporting measures, not much of a barrier towards greater inclusion; (ii) given how little variance is explained by our instruments' focus on teachers' views, it does not seem promising to pursue greater inclusive education programmes by way of great focus on changing teachers' attitudes towards it; and (iii), in spite of the considerable amount of research that has internationally been invested in problematising teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (e.g. de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2011; Krischler and Pit-ten Cate 2019; Kurniawati et al. 2014; Miller et al. 2022), teachers' attitudes in Sweden seem, in our measures, not much of an obstacle to greater inclusive education. Furthermore, the data suggest that Swedish teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their attitudes towards inclusive education, and their orientation towards collaborative working are all robust. The instrument scores tell of considerable confidence and overall positive attitude among teachers towards educational inclusion. We found that three-quarters of respondents (75.5%) show overall robust attitudes towards including pupils with special educational needs in regular classrooms; just 10% have less supportive views. The inference from this section is that the general attitude, values and policy measures in Sweden are in principle conducive to create effective teachers for inclusion (Persson, 2011; Magnússon, 2019).

2.2 Educational Inclusion in initial and In-service Teacher training in Sweden

The vision of a more inclusive and equitable education system requires teachers who are equipped with the competencies necessary to address diverse student needs in a rapidly changing society, such as in Sweden. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that a core element of inclusive education is ensuring that all teachers are prepared to teach all students. Inclusion cannot be fully realized unless teachers act as empowered agents of change, possessing the values, knowledge, and attitudes that enable every student to succeed.

Despite variations in teacher standards and qualifications, education systems are increasingly shifting from a focus on identifying deficiencies in learners to identifying barriers to learning (Symeonidou, 2017; Smith, 2021). To complete this paradigm shift, teacher education and professional development programs must challenge entrenched beliefs that some students are inherently deficient, unable to learn, or incapable (Florian & Camedda, 2020). Teacher training is therefore a fundamental mechanism for addressing contemporary educational challenges. It is a crucial component in enhancing the professional competence of all teachers and contributes to the development of equitable and high-quality education (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2023).

Effective inclusive education depends on teacher training that aligns with the evolving demands of schools. The centrality of teachers is underscored by Friesen and Cuning (2020), who assert that "teachers are the most significant resource for the effectiveness of educational inputs. The quality of their training is intrinsically linked to the fact that they are the main agents of achieving quality education" (p. 474). Well-prepared teachers are therefore essential to fostering educational environments that are genuinely inclusive and supportive of all learners

2.3 Teacher Education in Sweden

Teacher education in Sweden varies according to the level of schooling. Primary school teacher education typically requires four years to complete, while upper secondary school teacher education spans approximately 4½ to 5½ years. Teacher education programs generally comprise three core components (Mullis et al., 2015):

- Subject studies and subject didactics – Students receive instruction in the knowledge and skills specific to particular subjects, as well as the didactics relevant to different school types and levels.

- Educational science – Students are trained in areas of knowledge central to the teaching profession, encompassing the school as a social, pedagogical, and didactic environment for both students and teachers.
- Placement – Students engage in practical experiences within schools, developing skills in lesson planning, teaching, classroom management, and student relations.

The university in which this study is situated offers teacher education programs leading to teaching certification at all levels, from pre-school to upper secondary and adult education. Students interested in working with children with special needs may pursue certification in special education. Additionally, the university provides second- and third-cycle programs for professionals seeking advanced professional development.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This research has been developed with a qualitative, non-experimental and descriptive design. In this part of the research, we present the results of a pilot study based on interviews and text [course syllabi] analysis. The participants of this pilot project are two leaders: one Program leader for subject matter studies (Bridging Teacher Education Program, higher study rate, 90 credits) and one director of studies for Vocational training (Vocational Teacher Education Programme, 90 credits). The teacher candidates are expected to work in upper high schools. Many of the students are already working as teachers in different educational settings. The program(s) offer them *qualification certificates*. The text analyses focused on 11 syllabi from the two disparate program to discern what competences and content on TEI is reflected in national regulation and local curriculum. The pilot interview focused more on capturing the leaders' awareness and experience of inclusive education concepts or models throughout the program modules. The interview revolves around barriers in the teacher training when it comes to acquiring competence for inclusive education; on how (if) teachers receive professional or practical preparation in their training to meet the diversity of student needs; and, what training approach—pedagogical differentiation or individualization—prevails in the two teacher training programs regarding attention to diversity and mainstreaming. In the main research study in which more participants are included we will incorporate in detail the following phases: Information Gathering Techniques, Process, Ethical aspects, Documentary analysis phase, Collection and analysis of interview/qualitative information phase, Information triangulation phase. In this pilot study, I confined myself from writing extensive methodological discussion. The selection of the two programmes was systematic: one vocational and one subject-matter programme, chosen to explore potential differences in the utterances of the programme leader or director of studies. The interview guide revolves around: National and Local Frameworks; *Which TEI-related competences and content areas are embedded in national policy documents and in your institution's curriculum?* Understanding of TEI: *How do you understand and interpret the concept of TEI within the context of initial teacher education?*

Preparation for Inclusive Practice: *How do you support student teachers in developing the knowledge and skills they need to teach inclusively during their initial training?* Essential Competences: *In your view, which teacher competences are most critical for practicing inclusive education?*

In the full study, which will include several additional programmes, a more detailed comparison can be conducted. The analytical framework is guided by Inclusive Education Grid (Van Peteghem, & Consuegra (2021). As can be seen in the final section elements of the Inclusive Education Grid has been identified. Regarding ethical measures, the pilot study ensured voluntary informed consent, minimized potential risks, safeguarded participants' privacy, and maintained transparency through debriefing on the study and its outcomes. The university involved was kept anonymous, and neither faculty nor participants could be identified.

4. Results

4.1 Interview analysis

Awareness and Experience of Inclusive Education Practice
Participants indicated that no explicit module on inclusive education exists within content-based (subject-matter) courses. Nonetheless, several courses address related topics such as intercultural education, norm critique, conflict resolution, equity and equality, social relations, and leadership:

“I am not sure if the concept has actually permeated all our courses. The educational plan outlines that teacher candidates will be equipped with skills to identify pupils with special needs and, in collaboration with other school personnel, create a supportive learning environment...”
(Lena, Programme Leader)

“It is difficult to imagine how aspects of an inclusive approach can be infused in content-matter courses. I presume teacher educators handle this in practice, raising awareness of pupil diversity and teaching strategies relevant to the content area...” (Michael, Director of Studies)

It can be inferred from the interview that there is a lack of acquisition of the necessary skills by the candidates to respond to the diversity of the student body within the framework of an inclusive education.

“There are several hours of education dedicated to special education, conflict resolution and social relations as a single subject course” (Lena)

This perspective is reinforced by another interviewee, who noted the existence of a course focused on special education knowledge. However, they suggested that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to meet the needs of all students in heterogeneous classrooms, often relying on trial and error. The course in question appears to conflate special education with inclusive education. Although the skills and knowledge provided in this stand-alone course are valuable, they do not guarantee that future teachers will adopt an inclusive approach. Teacher training appears insufficient for fostering genuinely inclusive classrooms and learning environments, highlighting the need to distinguish between special education knowledge and broader inclusive education frameworks at the university level. As a result, teacher candidates often graduate with limited understanding of inclusive education concepts and practices. Mastery of subject content seems to be prioritized over its pedagogical and didactic application in inclusive settings. Achieving equitable, participatory, and high-quality teaching requires more than isolated modules; a fragmented approach is insufficient (Herrera-Seda & Walton, 2025).

According to the informants, limitations in teacher training impede the development of effective inclusive practices aligned with the inclusion paradigm. Best practices in teacher preparation for inclusive education include integrating inclusion content across courses, addressing attitudes and dispositions toward inclusion early and consistently, providing opportunities for collaboration and co-teaching, establishing strong university–school partnerships, and promoting collaboration among teacher education faculty (Pinter, 2022). The university has further work to do in this regard, a gap acknowledged by the interviewees.

To support the development of learning activities that incorporate inclusive education content, a list of instructional strategies can serve as a valuable tool. Such a list allows teacher trainers to focus on approaches that deepen students’ understanding while addressing the needs of diverse learner groups. The list is neither exhaustive nor fixed and can be adapted to individual pedagogical and didactic preferences. During the interviews, these ideas were discussed with the participants, both of whom were unfamiliar with the concept of integrating inclusion content across courses. The interviews further revealed that, at present, a stand-alone course remains the primary approach, rather than embedding inclusive education or special education content throughout the entirety of teacher-training programs

4.2 Document analysis

The programme on vocational teacher education: There is a strong case for investigating how inclusive education is incorporated in Vocational teacher programmes in Sweden. After their completed education, vocational teachers are qualified to work in three settings 1) upper secondary vocational programmes 2) vocational education for adults and, 3) upper secondary school for those with

intellectual disabilities. There is research/data from Sweden that show that vocational teachers (in contrast to other teachers) are likely to meet a greater diversity in their classroom than do other teachers. For instance, students who have a disability and/or have received special educational need support during their compulsory school years are more likely to pursue vocational education (Holmgren & Pettersson, 2023). Moreover, vocational teachers are more likely to meet students who have migrated to Sweden from a foreign country (especially in adult education) and in general have students with greater language diversity in their classrooms (Ennerberg & Economou, 2022). Even more importantly, vocational teacher education also provides qualification to work in upper secondary school for the intellectually disabled.

Apart from the student population, the vocational teacher programme differs in a significant way from many of the other regular teacher education programmes in terms of the content to be covered. The student teachers that pursue this degree already have subject knowledge in the vocation of interest, which is pre-requisite to applying to this programme. There are over 200 vocational subjects on offer across Swedish upper secondary and within adult education, making the focus of the programme more on the school system, policies, working as teachers, didactics etc. With this backdrop one would assume that the courses in the program would focus strongly on preparing teachers to meet the diversity of the potential student population they will be working with in the future.

The documents that are analysed here are the following:

- Programme curriculum
- Course syllabi of eight of the 11 courses. The three courses excluded are the practicum/work experience courses.
- Reading list of the same eight courses
- The organisation of the courses within the program is shown in the following table. All courses are compulsory.

Table 1. Course syllabi

Year 1	Term 1	Learning Theories and Vocational Skills for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
		Steering, Organisation and Assessment for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
	Term 2	Practicum 1 for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
		Applied Vocational Pedagogy for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
Year 2	Term 3	Evaluation for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
		Social Relations, Conflict Management and Leadership for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
	Term 4	Practicum 2 for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
		Special education for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
Year 3	Term 5	Assessment and Grading for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
		Development and Action Research for Vocational Teachers (7.5 credits)
	Term 6	Practicum 3 for Vocational Teachers (15 credits)

Reflections on the content of the syllabi:

Analysis of key documents in the vocational teacher education programme indicates that inclusive education content is largely confined to a few courses, suggesting it is treated as an isolated topic with limited recognition of its relevance to the learning and development of all students. This compartmentalization overlooks the interconnectedness and broader pedagogical significance of inclusive perspectives across the programme.

The courses on inclusive education are positioned late in the programme, and their content reinforces a sharp divide between general diversity and students with disabilities or special educational needs. While

diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, or social class is presented as a universal concern, disability and special needs are treated as exceptional, separate categories. This framing embeds an implicit process of othering: pedagogical considerations for students with disabilities are presented as relevant only to “these others,” rather than as integral to teaching all students. For example, upper secondary schools for students with intellectual disabilities are excluded from the general curriculum and addressed only in a separate special education course.

Such structuring risks reinforcing a mindset in which certain student groups are seen as peripheral or fundamentally different. The programme isolates disability and special needs from intersectional considerations that apply to other social categories, implicitly marginalizing these students. Although the curriculum emphasizes learning for all, the course structure communicates a focus on most students first, with special education content relegated to the end, often framed narrowly and without integrating inclusive education principles that are central in the Swedish context.

5. Preliminary conclusion/discussion

This study critically synthesises the main insights from the extensive literature and current state-of-the-art knowledge with a limited set of empirical data. While the literature review and policy analysis indicate that the Swedish education system is formally grounded in the principles of equity, accessibility, and inclusion, the findings of this pilot study call into question the extent to which these principles are meaningfully enacted within teacher education. Although Swedish teacher education explicitly aims to prepare future educators to address the needs of diverse learners—including students with disabilities, special educational needs, and those from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds—this commitment appears to be more strongly articulated at the policy level than consistently realised in practice.

Teacher education for inclusion is frequently presented as central to Sweden’s broader ambition to promote equity and quality in education. However, the results suggest that this ambition is only partially translated into teacher education programmes. Despite the stated goal of equipping teachers with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for inclusive practice, significant gaps persist in both initial teacher education and in-service professional development. Insufficient and fragmented preparation for inclusive education risks undermining the full realisation of inclusion in schools, a concern that is clearly reflected in the study’s findings.

Preliminary results indicate that inclusion remains marginally integrated across subject areas and is often treated as an add-on rather than a foundational principle of teacher education. Moreover, educators report a persistent and problematic gap between inclusive education policy and everyday pedagogical practice. These findings underscore Principles 1 and 6 by pointing to weaknesses in curriculum coherence and limited university–school collaboration. At the same time, the study highlights the influence of teacher educators’ beliefs and conceptualisations of inclusion (Principles 3 and 4), suggesting that variability in these understandings may contribute to the uneven implementation of inclusive education within teacher education programmes (see Ten Principles for Training Teachers for Inclusive Education in the Introduction).

As Miškolci et al. (2021) demonstrate, case studies of teacher training programmes in Sweden and internationally highlight an ongoing paradigmatic tension between special education and inclusive education. Many countries struggle to develop students’ relevant attitudes, knowledge, and skills—whether through stand-alone courses, the infusion of inclusive education into broader coursework, or school-based practicum experiences—while simultaneously being constrained by socio-political contexts dominated by special-education narratives (p. 573). Our interview data and text analysis similarly reflect this tension.

While research on the impact of teacher education on classroom practice remains inconclusive (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), more recent studies on teacher education for inclusive education argue that inclusive approaches should be embedded as a core component of general teacher preparation rather than treated as a specialized topic (Rouse & Florian, 2012). This shift requires rethinking how teachers are prepared and identifying the kinds of support teacher educators need to design programmes

that enable classroom teachers to provide high-quality inclusive education in diverse settings. However, what constitutes “high-quality” inclusive education—and how it should be taught and implemented across all levels—remains both unclear and contested.

Acknowledgements

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

Disclosure statement

The authors confirm no conflict of interest exists.

References

- Alquraini, T. A. S., & Rao, S. M. (2018). A study examining the extent of including competencies of inclusive education in the preparation of special education teachers in Saudi universities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 65(1), 108-122.
- Arnaiz-Sánchez, P., De Haro-Rodríguez, R., Caballero, C. M., & Martínez-Abellán, R. (2023). Barriers to educational inclusion in initial teacher training. *Societies*, 13(2), 31. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13020031>
- Barow, T., & Berhanu, G. (2021). Inclusive education in Sweden: Policy, politics, and practice. In N. B. Hanssen, S.-E. Hansén, & K. Ström (Eds.), *Dialogues between Northern and Eastern Europe on the development of inclusion: Theoretical and practical perspectives* (pp. 35–51). Routledge.
- Beach, D., & Dyson, A. (Eds.). (2016). *Equity and education in cold climates: In Sweden and England*. Tufnell Press.
- Bel Habib, I. (2001). *Elever med invandrarbakgrund i särskolan: Specialpedagogik eller disciplinär makt* [Students with immigrant background in separate schools: Special education or disciplinary power]. Högskolan i Kristianstad.
- Berhanu, G. (2008). Ethnic minority pupils in Swedish schools: Some trends in overrepresentation of minority pupils in special educational programmes. *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(3), 17–29.
- Berhanu, G. (2016). Contemporary Swedish society and education: Inequities and challenges. In D. Beach & A. Dyson (Eds.), *Equity and education in cold climates: In Sweden and England* (pp. 43–59). Tufnell Press.
- Berhanu, G., & Dyson, A. (2012). Special education in Europe: Overrepresentation of minority students. In J. Banks (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of diversity in education* (pp. 2070–2073). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Bui, X., Quirk, C., Almazan, S., & Valetti, M. (2010). *Inclusive education, research and practice: Inclusion works*. Coalition for Inclusive Education. Retrieved from <https://teaching.common.cdl.edu>
- Bükki, E., & Fehérvári, A. (2021). How do teachers collaborate in Hungarian VET schools? A quantitative study of forms, perceptions of impact and related individual and organisational factors. *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 13(1), 1–26.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2005). Studying teacher education: What we know and need to know. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(4), 301-306.
- De Boer, A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary school teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3), 331–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903030089>
- Emanuelsson, I. (2005). Inclusive education in some Western European countries: Different policy rhetorics and school realities. In *Contextualizing inclusive education* (pp. 130–154). Routledge.
- Ennerberg, E., & Economou, C. (2022). Career adaptability among migrant teachers re-entering the labour market: A life course perspective. *Vocations and Learning*, 15(2), 341–357. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-022-09294-w>
- Englund, T. (2005). The discourse on equivalence in Swedish education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(1), 39–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093042000322829>

- Engstrand, R. Z., & Roll-Pettersson, L. (2014). Inclusion of preschool children with autism in Sweden: Attitudes and perceived efficacy of preschool teachers. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 14(3), 170–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12020>
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. (2018). *Analysis framework for mapping inclusive education policies*. Odense, Denmark.
- European Commission. (2010). *European disability strategy 2010–2020: A renewed commitment to a barrier-free Europe*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52010DC0636>
- Florian, L. (2014). What counts as evidence of inclusive education? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29(3), 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933551>
- Florian, L., & Camedda, D. (2020). Enhancing teacher education for inclusion. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 4–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1708996>
- Friesen, D. C., & Cuning, D. (2020). Making explicit pre-service teachers' implicit beliefs about inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24, 1494–1508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1626817>
- Gidlund, U. (2018). Teachers' attitudes towards including students with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream school: A systematic research synthesis. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 17(2), 45–63.
- Göransson, K., Bengtsson, K., Hansson, S., Klang, N., Lindqvist, G., & Nilholm, C. (2020). Segregated education as a challenge to inclusive processes: A total population study of Swedish teachers' views on education for pupils with intellectual disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(14), 1367–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1779635>
- Göransson, K., Nilholm, C., & Karlsson, K. (2011). Inclusive education in Sweden? A critical analysis. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(5), 541–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2010.507948>
- Gustafsson, J. E., & Yang Hansen, K. (2018). Changes in the impact of family education on student educational achievement in Sweden 1988–2014. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62(5), 719–736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1305933>
- Haug, P. (2017). Understanding inclusive education: Ideals and reality. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 19(3), 206–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1224778>
- Helldin, R., Bäckman, Ö., Dwyer, H., Skarlind, A., Hugo, A. J., Nel, N., & Müller, H. (2011). Opportunities for a democratic pedagogy: A comparative study of South African and Swedish teachers' attitudes to inclusive education. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 11(2), 107–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01163.x>
- Herrera-Seda, C., & Walton, E. (2025). Teacher education for inclusive education: A scoping review of Global South scholarship. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2025.2345678>
- Holmgren, R., & Pettersson, G. (2023). The vocational teacher, an inventor in special needs education: A study on Swedish vocational programmes. *Nordic Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 13(2), 100–123. <https://doi.org/10.3384/njvet.2242-458X.2312100>
- Isaksson, J., & Lindqvist, R. (2015). What is the meaning of special education? Problem representations in Swedish policy documents: late 1970s–2014. *European journal of special needs education*, 30(1), 122–137.
- Jerlinder, K., Danermark, B., & Gill, P. (2010). Swedish primary-school teachers' attitudes to inclusion: The case of PE and pupils with physical disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250903450800>
- Kurniawati, F., De Boer, A. A., Minnaert, A. E. M. G., & Mangunsong, F. (2014). Characteristics of primary teacher training programmes on inclusion: A literature focus. *Educational Research*, 56(3), 310–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2014.917099>
- Kwakman, K. (2003). Factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19(2), 149–170. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(02\)00101-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(02)00101-4)

- Magnússon, G., Göransson, K., & Lindqvist, G. (2019). Contextualizing inclusive education in educational policy: The case of Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 5(2), 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2019.1632531>
- McDonald, T. (2013). *Classroom management: Engaging students in learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Miller, A. L., Wilt, C. L., Allcock, H. C., Kurth, J. A., Morningstar, M. E., & Ruppar, A. L. (2022). Teacher agency for inclusive education: An international scoping review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(12), 1159–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1945123>
- Miškolci, J., Magnússon, G., & Nilholm, C. (2021). Complexities of preparing teachers for inclusive education: Case-study of a university in Sweden. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(4), 562–576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1880257>
- Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Goh, S., & Cotter, K. (Eds.). (2016). *TIMSS 2015 encyclopedia: Education policy and curriculum in mathematics and science*. TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center. <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/encyclopedia/>
- OECD. (2015). *Improving schools in Sweden: An OECD perspective*. OECD Publishing. <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/Improving-Schools-in-Sweden.pdf>
- Paulsrud, D., & Nilholm, C. (2020). Teaching for inclusion: A review of research on the cooperation between regular teachers and special educators in the work with students in need of special support. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1744265>
- Persson, B. (2011). *Teacher education for inclusion country report: Sweden*. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. <https://www.european-agency.org/projects/te4i/country-reports>
- Pinter, H. H., Bloom, L. A., Rush, C. B., & Sastre, C. (2022). Best practices in teacher preparation for inclusive education. In *Research anthology on inclusive practices for educators and administrators in special education* (pp. 822–840). IGI Global.
- Reichenberg, M., & Berhanu, G. (2024). Addressing social disparities in special education placement in three welfare states: Student demographic correlates of the share of students identified with special educational needs at the school level using TALIS data. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 24(4), 960–971. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12675>
- Rouse, M., & Florian, L. (2012). Inclusive practice project. *Final Report*
- Sandberg, A., & Ottosson, L. (2010). Pre-school teachers', other professionals', and parental concerns on cooperation in pre-school: All around children in need of special support—the Swedish perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(8), 741–754. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903145382>
- Simoni Symeonidou, A. (2017). Initial teacher education for inclusion: A review of the literature. *Disability & Society*, 32(3), 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1298992>
- Skolverket. (2019). *TALIS 2018: En studie om lärares och rektorers arbete i grund- och gymnasieskolan. Delrapport 481*. Skolverket.
- Smith, K. (2021). Educating teachers for the future school: The challenge of bridging between perceptions of quality teaching and policy decisions: Reflections from Norway. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(3), 383–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1883981>
- Söderlund, G., Thoutenhoofd, E., Andersson, G. W., Gerrbo, I., & Berhanu, G. (2024). Inclusive education in Sweden: A survey of teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and collaboration towards better meeting pupils' learning. *European Journal of Inclusive Education*, 3(1), 142–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2024.1234567>
- Sveriges Riksdag. (1985). *Education Act, SFS 1985:1100*. <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/>
- Sveriges Riksdag. (2010). *Education Act, SFS 2010:800*. <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/>
- Takala, M., Hausstätter, R. S., Ahl, A., & Head, G. (2012). Inclusion seen by student teachers in special education: Differences among Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish students. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(3), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2012.684110>

- Thoutenhoofd, E. D., Söderlund, G., Andersson, G. W., Berhanu, G., & Gerrbo, I. (2020). *Utvärdering av kompetensutvecklingsinsatsen Specialpedagogik för lärande (SFL)*. RIPS, Institutionen för pedagogik och specialpedagogik. <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/67206>
- UNESCO. (2000). *Education for all 2000 assessment: Global synthesis*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2005). *Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Inclusive teaching: Preparing all teachers to teach all students*. Global Education Monitoring Report Team.
- Van Peteghem, H., & Consuegra, E. (2021). Aandacht voor culturele diversiteit in de (leraren)opleiding. In *Diversiteit in het hoger onderwijs: Van theoretisch kader naar praktijkgerichte verandering* (pp. 129–145). ASP.