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# The Didactic Challenges of Teaching Students with Autism

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## **Abstract**

*In the Swedish educational context the term "education for all" has a relatively long tradition but the interpretation and implementation of these educational policies has varied during the past six decades. The issues of class, gender, ethnicity and disability as well as discourses of inclusion, integration and exclusion have permeated the debates about and the implementation of "education for all". Today the number of students attending schools for students in the need of special educational support, due to their difficulties to reach intended learning outcomes, has increased. In this paper, I examine the specific didactic challenges teachers working with children with high functioning autism face. Additionally, the teachers' understanding of students' identities and problems are analysed. The study is based on interviews with six-form colleges teachers working in a school for students with high functioning autism. The interviews with teachers and school counsellors were conducted in a Swedish city and the questions discussed in the paper are:*

*Which didactic challenges face educators in their everyday work? What is characteristic for the educational practices at the analysed school and in which ways educators prepare students for their future life? In which ways the analysed educational institution contributes to inclusion/exclusion of the students and the implementation of "education for all" policy?*

*The analysis shows that teachers advocate individualised didactic solutions and help, extra resources, methodological clarity and step-by-step instructions. Teachers are expected to be highly adaptable and their work often centres on students social skills, behavioural training and socialization of youth, rather than only helping students to achieve expected learning outcomes. Thus, the "hidden curriculum" is here highly visible. The school is described as integrative because it gives students opportunity to practice their social skills and achieve expected learning outcomes but excludes them from general social contexts.*

**Keywords:** *autism; education; school; exclusion; inclusion; education for all*

## **1. Introduction**

Students might feel anxious to take the top plate in the canteen, because they prefer the forth in order; or you don't want to go in a straight line or you don't ride red buses because once there was a chap on the bus who resembled a chap you don't like. So, all red buses are regarded as dangerous. Or, after two years at this school you have difficulties perceiving that there is a third floor here. You

don't have a clue about it! So they have many limitations. /.../ In regular classrooms and schools, this wouldn't work. /.../ These problems are more noticeable when we are among other people, and you get blind to these issues when you are at The Plough. (Ethan)

The quote from an interview with a teacher illustrates some of the issues teachers have to confront, while working with students with high functioning autism spectrum disorder at the six-form college school I henceforth call The Plough. The teacher clarifies that in addition to curriculum related issues he has to tackle social issues that effect students' wellbeing and learning practices at the Plough. The Plough specialises in teaching students with high functioning autism. Autism was first described as a clinical syndrome in the 1940s. For instance, it describes extreme rigidity and tantrums, lack of social awareness and understanding of social communication, and repetitive routines and interests (Thompson 2005). At The Plough, students follows regular curriculum, but attend the school because they have difficulties participating in so-called regular schools. The aim of The Plough is to provide education for all children, but this is done through the adaptation of the school to a specific group of children, i.e. those with autism (c.f. Brodin and Lindstrand, 2010). During the past decades, the number of students attending schools for students in the need of special education has increased in Sweden (Skolinspektionen, 2011).

In Swedish education the phrase 'education for all' has a relatively long tradition, but interpretation and implementation of these educational policies have varied during the past six decades. The issues of class, gender, ethnicity and disability as well as discourses of inclusion, integration and exclusion have permeated the debates about the implementation of 'education for all' (Brodin et al, 2010). The concept of integration is based on the idea of two parallel school systems, one for the majority of students and one for those who are regarded as in the need of special educational help. Integration often involves the readjustment and normalisation of individuals with disabilities, while structural constrains are not recognised. Inclusion implies that differences are seen as a social asset and should be promoted and recognised. According to Salamanca declaration, all students should, as far as possible, learn together in common learning environments (UNESCO, 1994).

The aim of the current study is to examine the specific didactic challenges teachers, working with children with high-functioning autism, face. Furthermore, I examine teachers' deliberations on students' identities, and social relations and problems. Questions that are raised in this paper are: How do teachers interpret students' needs and experiences? Which educational considerations dominate teachers' reflections about educational practices at the Plough? In which ways The Plough contributes to the implementation of 'education for all'?

The study is divided in four analytic sections. First, I describe the aim of The Plough. Second, I depict educational and social challenges teacher face in their daily work. Third, I discuss the way teachers strive to overcome educational difficulties and finally I examine the way The Plough contributes to the implementation of "education for all".

## 2. Method

The study utilises in-depth interviews with five six-form teachers (one woman and four men) from a school with less than a hundred students, situated in the south of Sweden. The interviews were conducted in 2012 and the names of all teachers, places and the school are alias. After contacting the school principle, which gave me the permission to meet the school staff and present the research project, I scheduled the interviews with the volunteers. The interview length ranges from just under three hours to over four hours; in total over seventeen hours of interviews have been transcribed.

Qualitative interviews enable me to select the individuals who have the greatest experiences about the examined issues and I can get manifold viewpoints. Face-to-face dialogues democratise research, make individual voices public and put the interviewees in the focus (Thor, 2006). Additionally, interviews offer an insight into teachers' values, interests, opinions and norms (Thomsson, 2002). All interviews have been coded in accordance to themes that have emerged during the reading of the interview material (Peterson et al, 2003). The ethical codes of conduct that regulate the present research follow the guidelines of Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 *Inclusion and Exclusion*

This section explores how teachers perceive students' previous school experiences, the reasons why the students attend The Plough and pros and cons of schools like The Plough.

The interviewees denote that the majority of students have been excluded from everyday social contexts for much of the upper level of compulsory school. They did not regularly attend compulsory school and had started The Plough with modest knowledge, skills, abilities and understandings. There are several distinctive reasons, of which I will mention only a few, why prior schools have been unsuccessful in the inclusion of the students.

First, according to the teachers the six-formers have evasive behaviour and other social and cognitive difficulties. All teachers state that some of the aspects of autism are insufficient social skills, leading to a reduced circle of friends, withdrawal from social environments and difficulties working in groups. Social skills can have a major impact on school performance because learning is collaborative activity (Hattie, 2012; Ostmeyer et al, 2012). These are individual causes, which are nevertheless related to social and structural causes, such as lack of inclusionary policies and relational trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) describe relational trust as mutual dependency between individuals involved in a group, social respect and interpersonal social exchange.

Second, many students' difficulties have not been recognised in the previous learning environments. Instead, they had been labelled as lazy, odd and unfocused and did not receive necessary support. Diagnosis is a stigmatizing and exclusionary practice, or to put it in Christopher's words: 'There is a risk that society sees the individuals as inferior' (c.f. Hattie 2012). The dichotomy normality/deviation and the fact that the diagnosis is the postulate for their enrolment in The Plough are reoccurring themes in the interviews.

Third, the interviewees underline that anxiety interferes with the students' school performances. Psychology research indicates that children with autism show high rates of anxiety (Steensel et al, 2011, p 313).

*The Plough – inclusion through exclusion*

Many researchers agree that '[t]he effects of peers on learning is high' and that students 'with disabilities make the best learning progress in ordinary classes (Myklebust, 2002, p.260-261; Hattie, 2012; Håkansson et al, 2012; Willis, 2009). Indeed, the notion of 'education for all' has challenged the idea of so-called special education and there is a growing recognition that education, based on the discourses of difference, categorisation and compensatory teaching, leads to dichotomisation and segregation, resembles clinical teaching, and is not an effective teaching practice. While structural problems are neglected, the responsibility is placed on individuals. Critics have emphasized classification, differentiation, social class disparity, over-representation of so-called ethnic minorities, institutional bias, democracy issues, lack of ability to see the child's assets and emphasis on disability, noticeable increase in diagnoses, to name a few (Florian, 2010; Brodin et al, 2010; Östlund, 2012; Baines, 2012; Håkansson et al, 2012).

However, Florian (2010, p. 22) argues that:

[W]ithout special treatment (e.g. anti-discrimination legislation, ring-fencing of resources, provision of specialist support), students with disabilities, are denied equal opportunity for full and meaningful inclusion in the activities that typify everyday life, because impairment, by definition, is something that limits functioning, unless it is mediated in some way.

Willis (2009) underlines that just placing children in the need of special help 'in a setting with [other] peers does not ensure that "meaningful" inclusion will take place'. This is exactly what the interviewed teachers point at and why they advocate schools like The Plough. Common to all interviewees is the view that the objective of The Plough is to include youth into a learning community, which can provide optimized learning environments and limit above described exclusionary practices. In principle, they believe that The Plough is a positive, inclusive and much needed space for the socialisation and the teaching of youth. General belief is that the students attend school on a regular basis for the first time in their life, that they belong to a social context and that their needs are acknowledged.

Nevertheless, they do not deny that this is imposed through the exclusion from the surrounding communities and their peers. Amanda defines The Plough as 'a special school', which does not resemble the 'outside community', but she underlines that because of students' 'disabilities, they feel better [there]', or to put it more bluntly:

David: This is a segregated environment, which is inclusive in some strange way. It might sound really weird, but one is here for a reason, because of neuropsychiatric disabilities. This is in itself a form of exclusion. As I see it, many students are in a way included here, because they were previously always excluded. Many have never been a part of a social context.

Albeit, there is an ambiguous stance to the profile of the school, inclusion/exclusion dichotomy and the fact that ‘the outside world’ regards that ‘there is no normality’ at the school, that everybody who attends the school has a diagnosis and that the school environment is exclusionary, the teachers regard the school primarily as including. So, what makes this school more inclusive?

Due to the size of the school, the teachers seemingly acknowledge the students and give them multiple opportunities to succeed at schoolwork, which has previously been unreachable for a large number of students. According to David the students feel that they are not the school’s ‘rare bird’, but ‘a rare bird among many rare birds’.

Ethan: Here, they do not feel like strange figures; they are a part of a group. Here, they feel like ordinary students. It can be reassuring to know that ‘Here, I do not have to role-play, I can be myself.

But the outcome is ambiguous because there are those who feel more or less stigmatised by the diagnosis and the fact that they attend The Plough.

### ***3.2 The autistic bubble***

This leads to the question of ‘the autistic bubble’, a term used by the teachers to describe the difficulties students face as a result of autism and social exclusion.

#### *Escapism*

Christopher and the others clarify that ‘the autistic bubble’ is a derogatory term, which should not be used ‘in a serious way’, but they accentuates that many students live in their ‘sphere’, i.e. ‘bubble’, and that ‘they think only of themselves, play with their computer games’, while avoiding social interaction in the physical world, and are unable to interpret social codes in everyday situations. Special interests/hobbies, such as the virtual worlds of computer games, on line chatting, Japanese comic books Manga, modern fictional hero tails, fantasy literature, are seemingly more comprehensible than complex human interactions because they have strict rules of conduct and black and white interpretations of the reality. The teachers explain that many students have difficulty orientating them selves in space-time dimension, something that affects their ability to plan, interact and organise and learn. Accordingly, it appears as if many students have ‘a different state of consciousness’ and the perception of the world, and it is something that acceding to Christopher, Amanda, Bob, Ethan and David burdens many of the students.

#### *Self-Perfectionism*

The reoccurring theme in the interviews is students’ self-perfectionism, which incapacitates students, because a minor error can be a source of anxiety. Psychologists describe perfectionism as obsessive-compulsive behaviour and a disruptive pursuit of unattainable goals (Parker 1997). Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) hold that perfectionists are more concerned with the form, avoid mistakes and show signs of all-or-nothing behaviour, or as Bob explicates:

For some of the students everything must be perfect, otherwise it is not worth doing it. They can be writing a sentence that is in my opinion perfectly good; but that’s not exactly how they want it to be, so they erase it. They start over

again, all damn time. They can sometimes write half a page and then delete everything.

Ethan underlines that the students do not want to revise their texts, instead they want to get it right from the beginning, and 'It should be like a printed, published book'. Amanda and Christopher have had students who would run away or get paralysed when they were tested. Thus, it is vital how one assesses learning outcomes, and names and designs exams.

#### *Stress & Anxiety*

The interviewees state that to many students, anxiety is closely related to the fear of social interactions, perfectionism, previous life experiences, interpretation of social codes and their daily physical and psychological form. Absenteeism is a reoccurring problem at The Plough, even though the school personal states that they provide optimised school environment. Christopher remarks that the students have lower tolerance level, have low self-esteem, are more labile and 'less able to handle the pressure'. The teachers state that when students do not manage the schoolwork the work pile gets bigger, effecting their sleep patterns and well-being. Research indicates that children with autism experience sleep problems, something that negatively affects their daytime behaviour (Patzold et al, 1998).

David states that the school start, holiday breaks and the period before the graduation are turbulent periods because many students are afraid of change and feel that they will have to leave a familiar and secure social context and enter the world of unknown. He implies that in regular schools the majority of students long for freedom and adulthood, however this seems not to be the case at The Plough.

[Here], many have been a part of a social context and now this will disappear, and therefore they end up in a severe identity crisis: What comes after this? Many questions are being raised.

Hence, everyday life and school experiences are according to David 'a roller coaster ride' for many.

#### *Motivation*

A crucial impact on students' school success is motivation, which 'can be towards intrinsic or extrinsic attribution', i.e. it is internal or external (Hattie, 2012). Intrinsic attribution leads to a greater investment in learning. These are the issues that the teachers repeatedly return to.

David and Christopher remark that many students have a fairly low stamina and need to be 'sparked to light' externally, because their inner motivation is often absent. Research shows that children with autism find school assignments unstimulating and tedious, leading to disruptive behaviour and the avoidance of school-related tasks (Koegel, Singh, and Koegel, 2010). Koegel et al. (2010, p 1065) suggest that teachers need to focus on motivational procedures. The positive reinforcement of stimuli, reward programs and the promotion of school-culture are regular features at the Plough.

Typically, when students do something that is by the school personal regarded as positive, desirable or divergent from students' regular behaviour, they occasionally receive positive reinforcement. Christopher states that students might get "a scholarship for 500 kronor, a breakfast voucher or a cinema ticket." Ethan explains that the reinforcement of positive behaviour helps teachers 'to get the students to do more of certain things and less of other', e.g. reinforce 'punctuality, get them to do tasks, ask for help and leave the classroom during the breaks'.

Much of teaching and behavioural practice at the Plough has been inspired by cognitive behavioural therapy, a catchword by the school management. Several researchers have stressed the advantages of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in helping children with high-functioning autism (Rotheram-Fuller et al, 2011). However Rotheram-Fuller and MacMullen (2011, p. 269) find it critical to 'consider schools as a primary context within which to conduct CBT interventions'. They emphasise 'the need to increase the use of concrete activities, bring children into the setting in which the targeted behaviour was desired', something that is in my mind hardly possible in the exclusionary environments such as The Plough (Rotheram-Fuller and MacMullen, 2011, p. 269).

#### *Language difficulties*

Another reoccurring issue is students' language problems; particularly their concentration problems, inability to start and complete a task, dyslexia, problems with decoding and the fact that many are 'passive readers'.

Amanda: A passive reader is one who is reading a text without reflecting on what the text is about. You decode the words but if I were to ask you what this means then [you cannot answer]. /.../ You read the words without really thinking about what the text is about. /.../ It's all about reading comprehension.

Ethan describes students' problems with 'putting words and concepts in a context, reading between lines and thus, understanding the context'. Reading poetry is regarded as a 'hopeless task', given that poetry is full of metaphors and understanding it requires complex interpretation, as 'the authors play with words' (Ethan).

To make matter more complicated, many students find it strenuous to speak in front of the class and describe the social environment they are part of.

Bob: They do not know what to write about. When I say to a student 'Describe me your apartment', they do not know what's there to talk about. 'There are walls!' they might say, but then I have to ask 'What's on the walls, what's your wallpaper like, what kind of furniture do you have, how does it look like, how does the kitchen look like, is it a modern kitchen, how do cabinets look like, is there a fireplace?' – they do not understand this. They just say: 'Oh, It's a nice place'. I mean 'Nice place, what does that tell me?'

Studies show that the comprehension of a text and social contexts amongst individuals with autism is often lower than their level of reading ability (Huemer et al, 2010).



*Casualty, work-memory and abstract thinking*

Reading the following interview, one can trace students' difficulties to orientate themselves in social and learning contexts, execute tasks and organise memory so that they can recall important information when necessary.

Ethan: Some of them do not know the name of a single one of us teachers, after two years! How would they learn who Voltaire, Rousseau, Napoleon or Zola was? How will they learn this if they do not know that my name is Ethan and that Amanda is Amanda, although they have had us on a daily basis for two years?

They might say: 'You know, you there! You that we have in Swedish, right?'

'Yes it is me you have in Swedish, my name is Ethan!'

'Well, what's her name, she is English, or what is the French, no.'

'No, It's Bob you have in French'

'Yes, but she that talks so much!'

'You mean Amanda?'

'No, I do not know, show me a photo. She sits there, in that room.'

That's their description, but the name does not exist. How should I do if I were to have a question like: 'What happened at the Battle of Lützen?' Its impossible.

Similarly, Bob describes difficulties with school subjects in which one has to understand causality, complex systems and correlations, and needs to think in abstract terms. Amanda recalls an episode, where a student left a history lesson, after reading about concentration camps during World War Two, Holocaust and the Third Reich, to study the subject of Civics, where they were learning about genocide. However, the student could not relate the content of the history lesson to the subject of Civics. For the student these were different subjects and thus, the student could not see connection between these two pieces of subject knowledge.

Psychologists claim that individuals with autism have significant problems with working memory (Baltruschat et al., 2011). Working memory denotes the capability to store information and process it simultaneously and if necessary use it in a relevant context. There is evidence that individuals with autism have problems with the ability to compare and contrast, recall or recognize a piece of information, simultaneously process and store information, as well as to shift attention rapidly from one stimuli to another (Bennetto et al, 1996).

**3.3 The educational considerations**

I now turn to laying the rudiments of teachers' teaching considerations. This section examines not all elements but the substrate of teaching ideas presented in the interviews.

*Small class sizes and Personalisation*

The teachers regard classrooms with only a few students as optimal classroom climate. Hence the class size at The Plough does not exceed a dozen students. In contrast, even though there is no official statistics about the class sizes in Sweden, there are indications that an average class size in six-form college schools is around thirty (SCB, 2005).

Bob suggests that small class sizes are necessary if one wishes to 'give personalised instructions' and help everybody to 'cope with a subject'. Christopher, who at his previous workplace had up to 32 students, affirms that it is 'a luxury' with such small

class sizes, because having small schools and high teacher density are significant assets for learning. Often the teachers work face-to-face with the students.

Christopher: We can recognize all students without any problems. You can have relations with all students. /.../ If everybody knows everyone then it is much harder to disrupt and it is very difficult not to want to be a part of the community. You can have close contact with all students, acknowledge everyone and talk to everybody. It's about quick feedback, showing interest in students and getting them to understand that they can succeed.

In fact, everybody stresses importance of strong personal connections between students and teachers, importance of personalisation, gradual input of information and adaptation of teaching to student's needs and abilities. In Ethan and David's opinions, the notion of relational teaching implies that teachers acknowledge all students, regard them as individuals and have time for each of them. They declare that teaching and relational time is a prerequisite for successful teaching. Aspelin and Persson (2011) argue that partnership between individuals involved in learning/teaching processes has to be in focus, students should be acknowledged and recognised and teachers need to open students' horizons. Furthermore, teachers are expected to stimulate the participation of the students and produce positive learning climate.

Additionally, The Plough has implemented individual work/study plans and matrixes since mid 2000s and this has reframed the meaning and the methods of schooling for the students. The aim is to make students' learning, responsibilities and development visible and to encourage their self-evaluation. For the teachers, personalisation is also about adapting tasks to students' skills and special interests and giving quick feedback. Nevertheless, as following arguments show, it seems as if personalisation is centred on methodological deliberations, rather than providing students' with an opportunity to alter the content of teaching, and is a top-down teaching practice.

#### *Clarity & Flexibility*

Amanda argues that the starting point of a lecture is understanding of students' prior knowledge, how students learn and progress, and monitoring of learning. All teachers claim that successful teaching requires step-by-step instructions and they need to provide meticulous instructions; i.e. manuals and templates on how to summarize an article, write a book review or what to do when one has free writing; instrumental procedures, and clear goal and target settings.

Amanda: You have to do things far more gradually here. /.../ Here, I have to tell them how it should look like and maybe show them a manual. We might write together with them before we let them do it for them selves. I have to give them some tools and open some toolboxes so that they can link things together.

In addition to clarity, multiple ways of introducing and presenting content, power of visual instruction material, and closeness to students are emphasised.

Christopher: So, clarity, clarity, clarity! All instructions should be written on the white-board and personalized. They should be short and if needed one at a time. Specific instructions. Closeness to students is also important. (I: What do you

mean?) /.../ I can stay with a student for a longer time, I can get closer to them, and then it becomes much easier to get to know each other and understand what the individual needs in order to succeed. /.../ It's about trust and confidence.

Thus, knowing the learner and developing relational trust are amongst the more crucial factors in promoting learning (Hattie, 2012).

Flexibility, due to personalisation, unpredictability of situations and students' conditions, is another important aptitude, which is required from the teachers. For the teachers at The Plough this means to be able to switch lessons with their colleagues, change examination schedule or stay and work with a student after the school hours, to name a few examples.

Despite, the teachers' reflections are permeated by an instrumental view on education and knowledge and it is possible to conclude that they often concentrate on students' surface knowledge. Teachers reason that too multifaceted and analytic education can lead to stress and anxiety amongst the students. David, who says that it is hard to get more than a pass-grade due to this ostensibly clear, but rigid model of teaching, explains:

David: When I started working here, I gave a test and they got two questions to choose from. I had a group of six students but two students could not choose which question they will answer on so they answered both questions. Some of them have enormous difficulties making choices; 'Could one of the questions be more important? Am I missing something if I just answer one question?! Well, then I'll answer both!'

These and similar issue force David and others to 'overly adapt teaching' to the students and he is afraid that the emphasis on facts, 'straight-forward, simple exercises' and instructions, which students receive in all subjects, produce too confirmative and rigid behaviour amongst the students and hampers in-depth learning, development of higher-order thinking and their flexibility. In my view, this may enhance "the autistic bubble".

### ***3.4 Behavioural therapy or meeting learning outcomes?***

The major message is that, rather than only focusing on meeting the learning outcomes, as set by the Swedish National Agency for Education, The Plough strives to prepare students for social life in the world outside of the school.

Ethan: I want to help them, if not with the subject, then to be able to ride both blue and red buses. Although I am not a therapist, I can help them with certain strategies in their lives: how to converse, how to take physical distance when talking to somebody. That is more important than teaching them why Charles XII died.

The Plough functions as an institution for socialisation; i.e. the teachers' goal is to help the students to cope with everyday life and interact with people. All education is about socialisation and therefore identity construction; but at The Plough, rather than being a part of hidden curriculum, this is an explicit goal (Lozic, 2010). Interviewees underline

that their aim is to produce well functioning individuals in accordance to social norms and expectations, and thus, prepare them for inclusion in social networks, develop their personality and teach them social norms. It is against this background we have to interpret Ethan's words:

I am a teacher, so I would say that we dedicate our time to teaching, but I think that there is a shift from teaching, a goal that does not come first here; instead the focus is on learning them to understand their shortcomings and cope with everyday life. Not only here and now, but in the long run, after the school.

Amanda believes that social training and the development of students' leisure time are important parts of educational policies.

On the whole, some of the responsibility has moved from the home to the school, so from the parents, to the school. In general, teachers spend more time with the kids than their own parents do. Teachers know the kids almost better than their own parents. It's not only that they should learn this and that in accordance with the curriculum; but they should also learn democratic, ethical and social issues and it has become much, much, much more of that responsibility. /.../ I'm more like a mother to them, or to put it like this, I am more like a parent or adviser, or aid provider and knowledge mediator.

There is an ambiguity in teachers' reflections about the role of education. Even though they see the advantages in relational pedagogy, upbringing policies of the school, therapeutic work, parenting and socialisation many teachers consider that this affects negatively their main occupational function, that is to say to help students meet learning outcomes. Analysing special education, Östlund (2012) argues that knowledge related issues (i.e. meeting learning outcomes) are described in positive terms, while care and social work, as a part of education, is seen in a negative light. According to him it is rather problematic to dichotomise knowledge related issues on one hand and social and care work on other hand. In fact, social and care work are related to society's responsibility for the individuals who spend large parts of their lives in educational institutions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

My intention has not been to say that all students experience all of the above-mentioned difficulties or to depict students with autism diagnosis in a homogenising manner, but to illustrate some experiences and reflections of the teachers. I take as a starting point that the majority of the students have had disconcerting school experiences in the past, since their problems have not been tackled in an adequate manner. In the eyes of the teachers, The Plough provides a fair opportunity to meet learning outcomes and is a place, which can offer positive social and learning climate. All things considered, many students are provided with help, if not to overcome than at least minimise negative effect of space-time perplexity, anxiety issues, fear of social interaction, language problems, problems with the conceptualisation of social contexts, causality and abstract thinking, disrupted sleeping patterns and lack of motivation, to name a few.

Another crucial conclusion is that the teachers advocate personalised didactic solutions and help, additional teaching resources, methodological clarity, relational trust and step-by-step instructions. Essentially, methodological personalisation is based on the presumed idea of students' disabilities and their learning styles. Even though personalisation, as an educational ideology, has been seen as a way of encouraging students 'to become more involved in making decisions about what they would like to learn and how', it is difficult to see how this is implied at The Plough, which goal is to initiate the students into the common culture, organise education on the basis of regulated curriculum and teachers' distinct focus of methodological, rather than content based personalisation (Campbell et al, 2007, p. 138).

Furthermore, the teachers are expected to be highly adaptable and their work often centres on students social skills, behavioural training and socialization of youth, rather than only helping the students to achieve learning outcomes. Thus, the 'hidden curriculum' is highly visible in this educational setting.

Having said that, on one hand, the school integrates the students, by giving them multiple opportunities to practice their social skills and meet learning outcomes, but on other hand it excludes them from general social contexts. In line with Brodin and Lindstrand (2010), I am inclined to conclude that the existence of specific schools for students with diagnosis signals the failure of Swedish inclusive education, i.e. 'education for all', because it has failed to meet all children's needs. The bottom line is that The Plough and other similar schools separate youth from communicative environments, where children with different experiences and backgrounds interact, and the surrounding society, which does not meet its commitments. The Plough has been accused of being 'a sheltered workshop' (Christopher). Consequently, the school; even though its goal is to bridge the constraints the society produces for the children with disabilities; (re)creates the so-called 'autistic bubble'. This process of inclusion through exclusion is a paradox of present Swedish school system, which has difficulties in implementing Salamanca declaration for students with high functioning autism.

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