

Togetherness in Play and Learning

Special Needs Education in Mainstream Settings



**Inclusion from a historical
and practical perspective**



Inclusion from a historical and practical perspective

An inclusive community is the theme of the anthology in which this chapter appears. Considering the context, it can be appropriate to examine the definition of an inclusive community from both an historical and practical perspective. This is the main theme of this chapter.

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Two main points are presented: competencies and learning outcomes. These are inextricably linked. An inclusive learning community that provides all children and young people with appropriate learning outcomes requires a high level of general education and special education expertise.

Both the 'Framework Plan for Kindergartens' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) and the 'Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019) have the status of a regulation. The principle of an inclusive community is the primary focus of the framework plan and, consequently, an important component of the work carried out by kindergartens. Children attending a kindergarten¹ must have the opportunity to participate in play and to play an active role in both individual and group learning, they are to experience motivation and a sense of achievement based on their own needs and prerequisites, and they are to be included in social interactions. The 'Core curriculum' took effect in 2020 and focuses on the values and principles for primary and secondary education.

Part three in particular – 'Principles for school practice' – promotes an inclusive community. The core curriculum links an inclusive community to diversity. It emphasises that the school must offer an inclusive and inspiring learning environment in which diversity is recognised as a resource for the school. The school must also be a professional community. In this type of community, school staff members must reflect on their common values and work to develop the school's practice. Facilitating an inclusive community can therefore be viewed as a mutual boost for the school.

In other words, the principle of an inclusive kindergarten and school stands strong in Norway. The Norwegian authorities have signed several international agreements to ensure the implementation of an inclusive learning community for children and young people. The question addressed in this chapter is how the intention to create an inclusive learning community is reflected historically and in practice. The next section presents and discusses this. The main emphasis of this chapter originates from research related to issues in schools but is also highly relevant for kindergartens.

Inclusion from an historical perspective

Inclusion as a phenomenon became particularly relevant in the mid-1990s when Norway signed the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The statement addresses the principles for educating persons with special needs. It laid a foundation for shifting the focus from individual special needs to the school's ability to meet the different needs and prerequisites of all children. Among the principles presented in the statement were access to a regular school, child-centred education, and inclusive practices. A few years prior, Norway signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2003). This convention promotes, among other things, the right of all children to participate in education and in society as a whole.

Norway's education arenas were ready to some extent to incorporate the goals of inclusion into their school policies based on political actions carried out prior to the statement. Historically, Norwegian school policies have evolved from promoting a school for some to integration in today's schools, by which inclusion is considered a premise (Olsen, 2013). The Norwegian authorities decided several decades ago to close down special needs schools (Simonsen & Johnsen, 2007). All pupils are to be offered an education at a local school (The Education Act, 1998, Section 8-1). Consequently, every individual pupil is to experience being part of a larger learning community. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Bachmann, Haug and Nordahl (2016), there is still a way to go until the principle of an inclusive school is implemented fully in practice.

In recent years, alternative learning arenas in the form of special needs education units or bases have increased considerably (Jelstad & Holterman, 2019). This has taken

place parallel to decreasing numbers of Norwegian teachers with special needs education expertise and increasing numbers of special education learners being taught by inexperienced or unqualified teachers (Bachmann et al., 2016; Ombudsperson for Children, 2017; Nordahl et al., 2018). Ström and Hannus-Gullmets (2015) discuss a concern in response to the fact that the government encourages inclusion, while the implementation of the intentions of inclusion results in exclusiveness. Persson and Persson (2012) refer to a study conducted by Allan in Scotland in which both the headmasters and teachers express a positive opinion on inclusion as a principle, but the teachers experience that they do not have enough expertise to carry out or implement this principle sufficiently. This is also the case in Norway. Buli-Holmberg, Nilsen and Skogen (2015), for example, found that teachers with at least one year of special needs education training are better able to adapt the teaching than other teachers.

In recent years, inclusion has also become highly relevant in the field of early childhood education. We are continuously increasing our knowledge about how properly organised learning environments in kindergartens help young children experience a sense of community and forge good social relationships to a greater degree (Korsvold, 2010; Arnesen, 2017).

Different understandings of inclusion

There are different ways to understand the concept of inclusion. In this respect, Kiuppis (2014) described that the understanding of inclusion has evolved from a focus on children and young people with disabilities and their physical placement to the school's ability to cope with diversity. In his historic study, Kiuppis (2014) shows how UNESCO established programmes for 'Education for all' (in 1990) and 'Inclusive education'

¹ Kindergartens in Norway are pedagogical institution providing education and care for children aged 0-5 years.

(in 1994). These were related to regular education and learners with a learning or other disability, respectively. His main point was that when concepts have become intertwined over time, the original focus on disabled learners is lost.

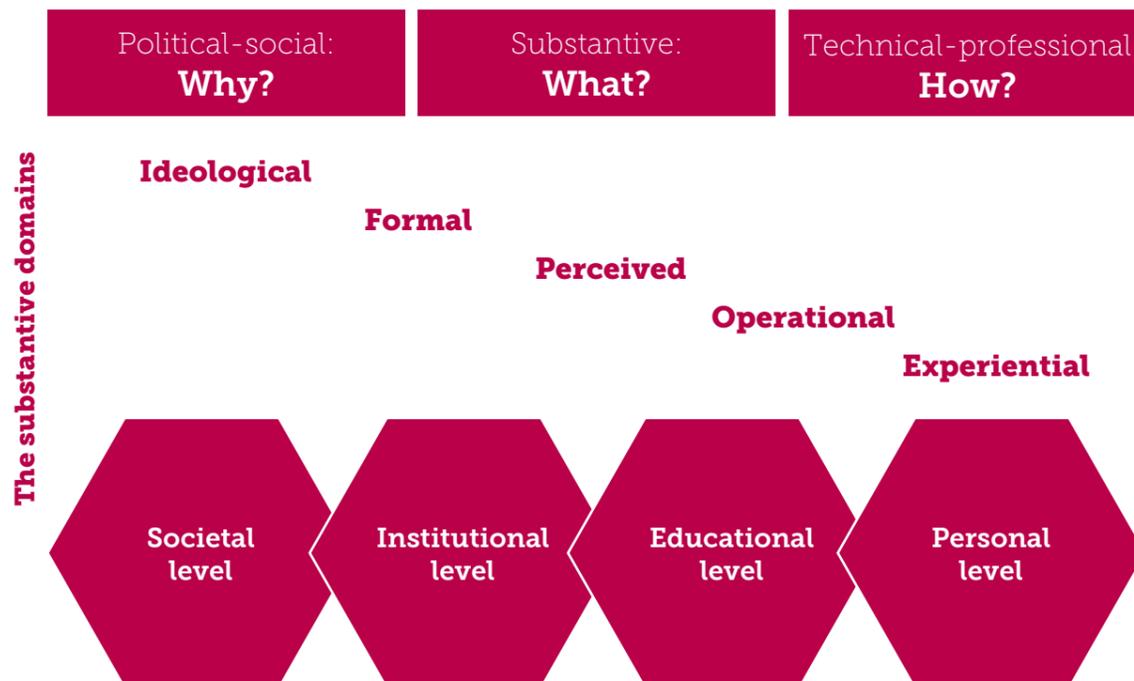
Haug (2017a, page 15) is also concerned about this dimension. He writes that the notion of inclusion is a response to what he calls “the lost implementation revolution”. He makes reference to an international trend in the 1970s in which the integration of pupils with special needs became a guiding principle. In Norway, integration was defined as the inclusion of pupils in a social community that enabled them to also enjoy the benefits of that community and share responsibility for it. This understanding has gradually changed in practice, with integration primarily revolving around placement (Haug, 2017a). There is therefore a risk that the concepts of integration and inclusion are understood as synonyms.

Complexity of the concept

To better understand the content of the concept of inclusion, an analysis is carried out from three perspectives: political-social (why we should include), substantive (what inclusion is) and technical-professional (how we pursue the goal of inclusion) (Olsen, 2013). This is illustrated in figure 1.

In the discussion of *what*, Strømstad, Nes and Skogen (2004) opted for a three-part approach to the concept: social, academic, and cultural. Solli (2010) expanded this to include belonging on the professional, academic, and cultural levels. The child or young person must experience a sense of belonging in a group, an academic adaptation to his or her abilities and prerequisites and that his or her cultural identity is accommodated and maintained. Cultural inclusion can also be understood as an inclusive school culture in which the staff is willing and able to facilitate inclusion. Olsen, Mathisen and Sjøblom (2016) have added an organisational perspective as an overall premise for these three aspects.

Figure 1: Analyzing a team – After Curriculum Inquiry by Goodlad,1979.



This means that the various frameworks for the education must be facilitated, including the ideological, physical, and administrative components. These must stem from a common understanding of inclusion as both a process and goal. Assessing the context in which the concept is used is incorporated into the examination of the *why* of inclusion. This context can be, for example, historical or political. *How* the concept is implemented in the teaching is preferably left to the individual educator to determine (Olsen, 2013). In this regard, Florian (2014, p. 291) points out two key factors: the educator’s confidence in his or her own qualifications and the continuous improvement and development of the educator. She claims that one of the challenges to achieving this is “[c]hanging thinking about inclusion from ‘most’ and ‘some’ to everybody”. In other words, an understanding must be established that the premise of an inclusive kindergarten and school applies to all children and young people, not only specific groups.

The actors involved in the debate on inclusion are active on different levels. These inclusion actors are found on the societal, institutional, educational, and personal levels. On all of these levels, it is the actors involved that define the limits for implementing and evaluating inclusion (Olsen, 2013). The level of commitment to inclusion may differ depending on the level represented by the party concerned. On the societal level, for example, parliamentary and other reports are produced and there is both political engagement and a general public debate on inclusion. By comparison, the personal level entails such parties as parents, teachers, and pupils. Their understanding of how the inclusion ideology is to be translated into practice is linked to both their understanding of inclusion and the scope of action they believe they have been given.

Apart from the parties being on different levels, the responsibility for an inclusive learning environment and an inclusive community also lies on several levels. This is described by Mitchell (2008) and others. Mitchell conducted a meta-study of international research in this area. The findings led him to conclude that there are ten elements that characterise an inclusive school: vision, placement, adapted plan, adapted assessment, adapted curriculum, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership. All of these factors determine whether or not a learning community is inclusive. This multi-level perspective also reveals that inclusion depends on the concrete actions of the kindergarten or school and successful inclusion requires a shared vision and positive attitude on the part of all parties, including management. Inclusion pertains to the entire kindergarten or school as a system. Administrative support and a committed management team are a prerequisite for success.

According to Haug (2017b), there are two ways to understand inclusion. With a one-dimensional understanding, inclusion is a question of the physical placement of the individual. In this case, the child or young person either receives special needs education in a segregated setting or together with the regular group/classroom of children. This type of understanding has been met with criticism and perceived as narrow-minded. For example, Wendelborg and Tøssebro (2011) write that physical placement in a regular class does not guarantee a good and inclusive learning community. A characteristic of the second type of understanding inclusion is that it pertains to establishing a high-quality learning community in order to ensure good academic results (Haug, 2017b). Examples of this are a high level of pupil engagement and good social relationships, which Hattie (2009) considers key indicators of a good learning environment.

Dimensions of inclusion

Haug (2005; 2014) writes about four dimensions of inclusion: enhanced community, enhanced participation, enhanced contribution, and enhanced benefits. This translates into taking part in social activities and experiencing a sense

of belonging. The learners should have the opportunity to contribute to their own learning process

and benefit both academically and socially. A comparable approach is reported by Farrel (2004), who describes key inclusion factors: physical presence in the classroom, acceptance and recognition by the institution's staff and other children, active participation in community activities and the opportunity for positive self-development. Both Haug's four dimensions and Farrel's factors refer to conditions outside of the influence of the child or young person. This signals that the responsibility for inclusion lies with the staff of the kindergarten or school.

Both Haug and Farrel use the word 'participation' as a key factor for inclusion. Participation can be understood in two ways: subjective, perceived participation and objective participation, observable by a third person. Experiencing participation requires acceptance, engagement, and autonomy. What can be observed by another person is whether the individual belongs to a group, whether the activities are accessible and whether interaction takes place.

It is because people become excluded that we need to talk about inclusion (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Inclusion is not something that has a start and finish, but a continuous process. Booth and Ainscow (2001) write about the importance of an inclusive school culture, inclusive strategies, and inclusive practices. Again, we see how inclusion is raised to a responsibility on several levels. If we specifically examine inclusive practices, a study conducted in Iceland shows that teachers consider it good luck or bad luck

when it comes to whether or not they have pupils with special needs in their class (Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Another Icelandic study (Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014) reveals that teachers did not have a clear understanding of the ideological aspects of inclusion. The teachers had very few reflective discussions.

Inclusion from a practical perspective

If we are to understand inclusion according to Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) as values that must be translated into practical actions, it is important to also shed light on the practical aspects of inclusion.

Slightly over 90 percent of children ages one to five years attends a kindergarten (Statistics Norway, 2019). This percentage increases in correlation with age. Children have the right to attend kindergarten from the age of one. This right, as well as the right to an education, is closely linked to the principles established by the Norwegian authorities of an inclusive, adapted, and equal education (Olsen, 2013). Securing the right to attend kindergarten and school also secures a learning environment adapted to the child or young person. The Education Act (1998, § 1-3) maintains the principle of adapted learning, which is the obligation of the school and which applies to all learners, regardless of whether they are enrolled in special needs education or not.

It can be challenging for kindergartens and schools to safeguard the considerable diversity of children and young people who are to be part of the learning community. Unfortunately, the number of pupils enrolled in separate units or special schools has steadily increased in recent years (GSI). At the same time, GSI figures show that the percentage of learners receiving special needs education in the regular classroom in smaller groups is also increasing. This can signify a trend in Norwegian schools in which special needs education is integrated into the classroom (Danielsen & Olsen, 2020).

Special needs assistance and special education

Pre-schoolers have the right to special needs assistance if circumstances require this (The Kindergarten Act 2005 Section 19a). This right is individual and unrelated to whether or not the child is enrolled in kindergarten. Learners who cannot or will not benefit from a regular education have the right to special need education (The Education Act 1998 Section 5-1). Around eight percent of Norwegian pupils receive special need education services. Haug (2016) points out that the percentage of learners struggling at schools is much higher. He estimates that this concerns 25 percent of all pupils in schools. He bases this figure on, among other things, how many pupils score below the critical value in PISA studies and how many do not graduate from upper secondary school.

A report by the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children (2017) revealed that the quality of special needs education services in many cases is inadequate. The following year, a government-appointed committee of experts arrived at the same conclusion (Nordahl et al., 2018).

The quality of special needs education services was also addressed in a parliamentary report published in the autumn of 2019 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The theme of the report was early intervention. The concept is understood in two ways: offering a good general education from preschool age and quickly establishing measures when problems arise. The first interpretation entails a preventive perspective. A good and inclusive learning community can help reduce skewed development in children and help prevent any learning difficulties from increasing.

The same report (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) has the additional provision that the quality of the school must be enhanced. One of the measures proposed is to require special qualifications

for those offering the special needs assistance and special need education. Another measure is to consider special needs education services.

Special needs education expertise

Special education teacher is not a protected title. Yet it is often used for individuals who teach children and young people as part of special needs assistance or special need education. A stricter definition of the term 'special education teacher' refers to teaching staff with a degree in special needs education.

In 2020, there is no special requirement to have a degree in special needs education in order to teach learners with special needs, but the government has announced a possible change to this (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019).

Many students with an individual plan for special education are taught by assistants. In many cases, these are competent professionals, but the question still remains as to the kind of learning support the pupil receives when the assistant has neither pedagogical nor special needs education training.

Spotlight on an inclusive community

Several large-scale projects have been carried out to help create an inclusive community in kindergartens and schools. Examples are the projects *Vi sprenger grenser* [*We're pushing beyond the boundaries*], *Inkluderer på alvor* [*Taking inclusion seriously*] and *All Aboard*. Below is a brief presentation to illustrate the projects that have proven to challenge attitudes and knowledge effectively in practice. At the same time, these projects highlight a few key obstacles to achieving an inclusive community throughout society. *We're pushing beyond the boundaries* was a project aimed at raising the quality of the education for learners with general learning difficulties, developmental disabilities, or complex functional disabilities.

Statped was given the responsibility to carry out the process. The four Statped regions launched various projects in partnership with the owners of kindergartens and schools. Follow-up research shows that it is possible to achieve a positive development, but the researchers pointed out that expanding these efforts would require political support and clear management goals (Kittelsaa & Tøssebro, 2015).

Inkludering på alvor [Taking inclusion seriously] was an initiative by the Ministry of Education and Research launched in 2017. The goal was to develop collaboration models that would help children and young people with special needs to experience a sense of inclusion in kindergartens and schools. Another goal was to identify factors that would promote inclusion in kindergartens and schools. A total of five sub-projects were launched in Agder and Trøndelag. The sub-report from May 2019 demonstrates, among other things, that the participants have different understandings of the concept inclusion (Caspersen, Buland, Valenta & Tøssebro, 2019). This project also involved discussions on how these efforts could be expanded.

All Aboard is an Erasmus² project that was completed in 2019. The goal was to 'develop and strengthen competencies relating to inclusive learning environments for children, young people and adults with special needs' (Statped, 2020). The project was a partnership between Norway, Great Britain, Belgium and Finland, the goal of which was to develop good inclusive practices that could be shared nationally and internationally. The project included the development of a website and modules for online seminars and inclusive practices.

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine how the intention of inclusion plays out in practice. Norwegian kindergartens and

schools are to be an inclusive learning arena. Nevertheless, there appears to be a significant discrepancy between the ideology and the experiences of children and young people with regard to feeling included (Olsen, 2013).

Many pupils experience that their physical, psychological, and academic needs are not sufficiently met at school (Ombudsperson for Children, 2017). In that context, there are two questions in particular that are worth discussing: the question of competence and the question of learning outcome.

Question of competence

Teacher education in Norway does not require training in special needs education apart from three themes for which no guidelines are provided in terms of quantity and extent (reading and writing difficulties, mathematical difficulties and social/emotional difficulties). The government's intention to ensure an inclusive education is expressed in policy guidelines for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. It is not followed up with regulations for kindergartens and teacher training, which would largely safeguard special needs education competence in kindergartens and schools. We have good research evidence about the significance of special needs education competence for effective facilitation, including self-reports from the teachers themselves (see, for example, Buli-Holmberg et al., 2015).

If special needs education-related subjects are not a mandatory part of preschool teacher training and teacher education, kindergartens and schools run the risk of not having staff members with competence in this field. This will most likely affect the education offered to children and young people, including those without an individual plan for special need education. This is clear from, among others, a study conducted by Buli-Holmberg et al (2015), which found that special needs

education training provides teachers with the confidence to use tools to adapt the education. This also implies that special needs education competence is important to meet the requirements of The Kindergarten Act and The Education Act with regard to offering adapted education.

Although many employees of kindergartens and school lack a formal education in special needs education, many have also acquired relevant knowledge and skills through many years of experience with working with children and young people with special needs. And this kind of knowledge takes time to accumulate. Many municipalities and a few schools have a special needs education team that assists educators and assistants. This kind of mentor programme is an important form of support for teachers, but it does not replace special needs education training.

One of the obstacles to the creation of an inclusive learning community is the problem of attitude on various levels in schools. This may be due to perception of 'good luck' or 'bad luck' (according to Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014b) or the willingness or reluctance to accept learners with special needs. More and more municipalities are establishing special needs education unit or small bases located in schools. This type of organisation gives teachers in regular schools the possibility to exclude pupils who are not wanted.

There are several reasons why teachers are reluctant to embrace learners in their classes who have significant special needs. One of them may be that they do not have the competence needed to create an inclusive learning community. In their handbook, Booth and Ainscow (2001) point out that an inclusive school culture is a key factor for achieving inclusion. The characteristics of an inclusive kindergarten or school culture can be traced back to the ten characteristics of an inclusive school defined by Mitchell (2008). A common vision can be

established in which inclusion is a basic premise. Children and young people must be provided access to the community and experience acceptance for the diversity they represent. Both the learning plan and learning challenges must be adapted to the child's abilities and prerequisites. This does not specifically pertain to individuals with a learning or functional disability but are principles that concern all children and young people. The lack of joint discussions among staff makes it difficult to achieve a school culture with positive attitudes towards including all children and young people in the community.

Question of learning outcome

Several of the sub-projects in *We're pushing beyond the boundaries* project reported an increased learning outcome for learners when the teacher focused on inclusion and inclusive practices. Gunnþórsdóttir and Bjarnason (2014) write that teachers have vague ideas about inclusion and spent insufficient time on reflection. The sub-report from the project *Inkludering på alvor* [Taking inclusion seriously] also pointed out that the participants had different understandings of inclusion. They continue to speak of 'the child who is included'. As such, it is an 'us and them' relationship (Olsen, 2016), in which there is a distinction between the regular group and those who appear to be different. As long as we speak of *including* someone, this means that children and young people continue to be *excluded*, claims Ainscow et al. (2006).

Many teachers consider special needs education schools or a special needs education unit at kindergartens and schools as positive and believe this approach should be expanded – despite the fact that this type of organisation contributes to the exclusion of many learners from the regular community. Perhaps it can be argued that this is *because of* the problems.

² Erasmus projects are part of the EU collaboration programme for education, training, youth and sports.

They experience a significant distinction between ‘their’ pupils and the other ones. This pertains to both personal interests and academic performance. They see a need to focus on belonging for learners based on ability rather than age. Consequently, the curriculum can be adapted to the individual to a greater degree.

At the same time, it is important to reflect on the learning outcome achieved by learners with special needs. Reports in recent years (see, for example, Ombudsperson for Children, 2017; Wendelborg, Kittelsaa & Kaspersen, 2017) have revealed that the learning expectations of pupils with disabilities are lower. Teachers appear to be more concerned with the social aspects than the academic inclusion of these learners. Experiences with different types of people is an important social skill for everyone. At the same time, it is important that kindergartens and schools also focus on the academic side of an inclusive community.

Children and young people need to be challenged – regardless of the learning challenges they bring with them into the classroom. A flexible organisation and differentiation of the content, pace and method can facilitate a learning environment that promotes social and academic belonging for all of our learners.

Summary

Both national and international projects have been launched in Norway with a focus on the inclusion of those with special needs. These projects have demonstrated the importance of competence development and embedding the efforts on the management level in local and county municipalities. At the same time, these efforts have shown that the knowledge and understanding established through these projects are insufficiently shared with other kindergartens and schools. Projects like *Vi sprenger grenser* [We’re pushing beyond the boundaries]

Inkludering på alvor [Taking inclusion seriously] are important for conveying knowledge about inclusive processes. The challenges that are pointed out in the various reports accompanying the projects suggest that the question of competence must have a stronger and more distinct political dimension. The parliamentary report *Tett på – tidlig innsats og inkluderende fellesskap i barnehage, skole og SFO* [Early intervention and inclusive education in kindergartens, schools and out-of-school-hours care] (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) proposes establishing special qualifications for those who teach children and young people with special needs. This will involve a major change and may also affect how special needs education is offered as part of preschool education and teacher training.

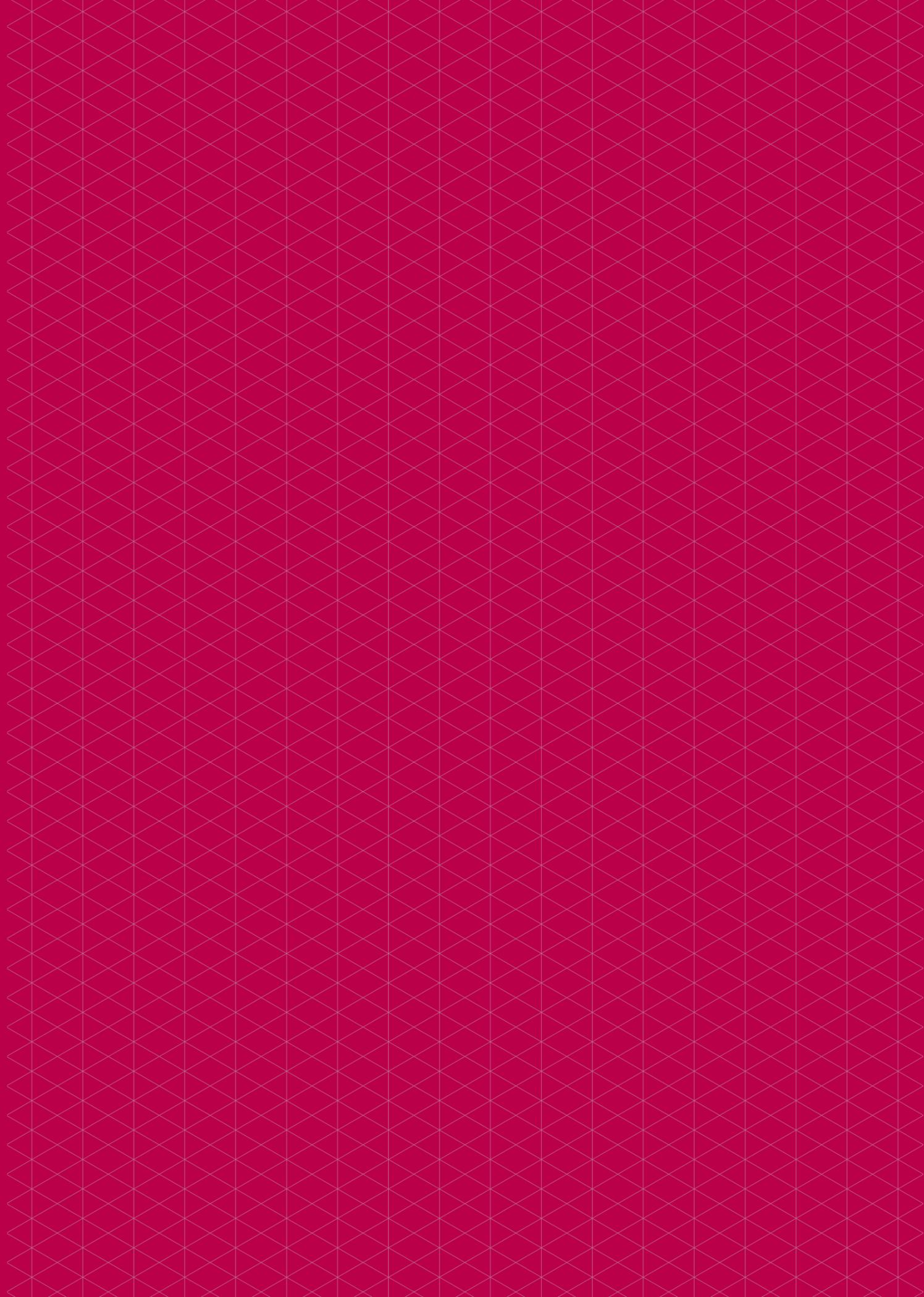
In the long term, increased diversity creates a broader and more inclusive society. Perhaps it cannot be expected that children with a significant mental age difference will perceive one another as equals in a purely academic sense, but we can expect them to show each other respect. This is a good practice regardless of age. In addition, we should be able to expect that those offering special need education assistance have the competence required to provide learners with academic challenges based on their individual abilities and skills.

The ideology of inclusion must be moved beyond the individual level in order to enable the community to accommodate diversity. Kiuppis (2014) believes that awareness about functional disabilities is reduced when the notions of ‘education for all’ and ‘inclusive education’ converge. This is absolutely a risk. At the same time, we must progress in that direction if the community in regular kindergartens and schools is to be dimensioned to embrace the entire diversity of children and young people. In this case, ‘inclusive education’ must be a natural and integral part of ‘education for all’.

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From a sociocultural perspective, children’s learning and development occurs through participation in social communities – where community with peers is of particular importance. Children’s participation in learning communities with other children, or facilitation of such participation, is a recurring theme in this anthology. The contributors to this anthology are advisers at Statped with experience from a variety of fields. They account for various approaches founded on experienced-based and research-based knowledge. What they all have in common is that they, through their adviser roles, have worked closely with the field of practice. This anthology shares the experiences from collaborations with kindergartens and schools in the efforts to develop a knowledge-based practice.

The anthology is primarily directed at students and professionals who work in kindergartens and schools but may also be of interest to others.

