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Evaluating the quality of learning environments and teaching practice in special schools

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Abstract

This article reports on findings of a study which objective is the development of an instrument for systematic evaluation and improvement of the quality of teaching in special schools. The article describes the research process which led to the construction of the instrument as well as the way teachers can use the instrument to improve the quality of their teaching.

The article advocates a practice perspective to professional development in special schools, as special schools in Denmark are under pressure by three international educational agendas: the agenda of accountability, the agenda of standards and the agenda of inclusion. The instrument suggests that professional development is teacher driven and not driven by the accountability agenda.

The research approach was collaborative as 35 teachers and principals from 16 special schools participated in the research process. Their perceptions of quality in the practice of teaching in special schools and research literature on the quality of teaching in both mainstream schools and special schools have shaped the development of the instrument. Thus, the instrument is based on the finding, that teaching methods in general and special education are not as different as assumed. This finding is reflected in the instrument.

Key words: Special needs education, educational quality, self-evaluation and professional development

Background

In many European countries, demands on quality increase – for all parties in the educational process. Thus, quality control and improvement have become the fundamental concern of educational governments (Wastiau-Schlüter 2004) and a number of self-evaluation instruments have been developed in response (Hofman, Dijkstra, and Hofman 2008). Increasingly, special schools in Denmark are also held accountable for the quality of education they provide, so just like in mainstream schools the use of quality evaluation and feed-back systems has become important.

Special schools in Denmark are under pressure by three international educational agendas: the agenda of accountability, the agenda of standards and the agenda of inclusion. In the Danish educational debate all pupils' achievement are strongly emphasized, based on a concern about

the progress of pupils in special schools and special classes in comparison with other pupils. However, the monitoring of achievement and progress of this group of pupils has often been less rigorous than in mainstream schools as well as the achievements tends to be unrecognized and unscrutinized by national and international studies such as PISA and TIMSS which examine school attainment. This gives rise to myths that special schools emphasize pupils' well-being, rather than pay attention to their learning achievements, as well as they are less academic and contain more manual and physical activities.

Furthermore, special schools are challenged by finding ways to secure their future in an inclusive educational system. In Denmark, inclusive education has become a highly prioritized national agenda, and the Government's formal commitment to the development of an inclusive school system was proclaimed in 2012 by the amending of the Folkeskole Act. It called for reducing the numbers of pupils in special schools and special classes (from 5.6 % of pupils in 2010 to 4 % by 2015) and also encouraged mainstream schools to be more inclusive. At the same time it was stressed that the educational system will continue to include special schools and special classes, though to a lesser extent. As a result of these national inclusive efforts, special schools have become marginalized in the municipalities' school systems, financially impoverished and teaching staff feel growing resignation. A new ministerial initiative intended to break this pattern by encouraging and empowering special schools to take part in the transition process towards a more inclusive school system. This participation should be accomplished not by closing down special schools, but, on the contrary, by raising their educational teaching standards in order to support mainstream schools to include better pupils in need of special attention. However, this new role for special schools requires professional development in order to communicate with mainstream colleagues.

Up till now, special schools have often been ignored or denigrated, and there is a lack of knowledge about special schools and their teaching culture and practices. Therefore the Ministry of Education initiated and financed a study with the aim to provide meaningful and reliable comparative information about pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching practices in special schools in order to facilitate professional development. This study was conducted from January 2013 until February 2014 in collaboration with the National Institute of Social Research (SFI) and the University of Aarhus, Department of Education.

The overall study included four parts: 1) A systematic review of research on the quality of special schools (Dyssegaard and Larsen 2014), 2) a national survey of principals in special schools in Denmark and educational psychologists in all Danish municipalities (Rangvid and Egelund 2014), 3) a survey of pupil outcomes in special schools (Rangvid and Lynggaard 2014) and 4) the development of an instrument for evaluating the quality of teaching practices in special schools (Tetler and Hedegaard-Soerensen 2014; Morin 2014). The overall research project illustrates how special schools are influenced by the agenda of accountability, described as a global pressure associated with the push for specific and measurable pupil outcomes (Hardy 2012). The first three parts of the Danish study can be seen as a part of a managerial approach to educational practice, as the aim of the study – seen from the perspective of the Ministry of Education – has to do with the ability to regulate and control the use of resources in special education. As a part of this managerial approach is the process of quantitative measures of pupil achievement, as pupil achievement becomes an important quality indicator for effectiveness of

the practice of teaching. Thus the professional development of teachers' practices is an integrated part of the accountability agenda.

This article focuses on the fourth part: development of an instrument for evaluating the quality of the learning environment and teaching practices in special schools in order to facilitate professional development. Even though the outset for the instrument for evaluating the quality in teachers' practice is this accountability agenda, it has not been the generator for the development of the instrument. Rather, the aim of this fourth part of the study has been to provide teachers in special schools a self-evaluating instrument that is based on knowledge about the culture and practice of teaching and allowing teachers both to consolidate existing good practice and to facilitate for professional development by focusing on curriculum initiatives. The question, however, is which criteria of quality are relevant for evaluating teaching approaches and practices in special schools when focus is on pupils' learning achievement, as well as on developing their social competencies and personal well-being? Then, an initial crucial question to ask is: To what extent do pupils in special schools need teaching strategies that are different from strategies used in the general educational system? Or put in other words: What is special about special education?

Quality of teaching practices in special schools. What's that about?

Evaluation of quality is, in many ways, a matter of opinion. Skårbrevik (2005) talks about two central concepts in Norway, when the discussion is about the quality in special education: the concept of adequate programs and the concept of equity. Adequate programs are about differential teaching approaches, designed to meet pupils' experiences, interests and needs, which is a critical component of the Danish school reform. However, a study from The Danish Evaluation Institute (Evalueringsinstituttet 2011) shows teachers' perceiving the principle of differential teaching very difficult to get along with in their teaching practices. They express a quite narrow understanding of the principle, as they talk about differential teaching as individualized teaching and as a way to organize teaching in tiered groups. They primarily see it as a method they can use, when they have 'enough hands' in their classrooms. Thus, the challenge is to make this principle as a basic and sustainable part of the learning culture. Hence, it is important for teachers to plan, teach and evaluate activities, having both the learning community and the individual pupil in mind. Pupils' diversity is emphasized within the framework of the class community, and cooperation with the pupils on aims, objectives and academic points in the lessons is at the core of understanding the concept of differential teaching. In line with that, Corbett (2001, 1) refers to a 'connective pedagogy', which connects the learner with their own way of learning, thus connecting them with the curriculum.

Another quality indicator of teaching pupils with special needs is about pupil participation, and a study of Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) has shown how to prompt teachers to examine ways of increasing pupil participation, engagement and motivation. In the study, teachers were able to develop more effective pedagogical approaches to maximize pupil participation and achievement. This dimension is also emphasized in other studies that document that children emphasize the importance of being able and to learn, to participate in the social life of school, and to give and take more responsibility at all institutional levels (Ruddock 2007; Tangen 2009).

In a study conducted by Tetler and Baltzer (2011) pupils express that they lack positive experiences of influence and appreciation. Seen from their points of view, schools need to create learning situations and processes based on values such as ‘pupil influence’ and ‘educational participation’. However, facilitating pupils’ development of autonomy and engagement in their own learning processes requires involving them in teaching planning and evaluation even if they have difficulties expressing their wishes or requests verbally. Not least, it requires time for teachers to reflect on how to balance inconsistent processes such as support and challenges to each individual pupil, protection and autonomy, security and risky situations.

According to a recent research meta-review, three main factors of creating a climate that facilitates learning have been identified (Mitchell 2014): 1) relationships (the extent to which people in the classroom support and help each other); 2) personal development (the extent to which personal growth and self-enhancement is facilitated) and 3) system maintenance (the extent to which the classroom is orderly, and educators are clear in their expectations, maintain control and are responsive to change). This view is supported by a review from Nordenbo (2008). As Mitchell focuses solely on the classroom’s psychological climate, we have found further inspiration from another meta-review conducted within a context of ‘good teaching’ (Meyer 2004). He finds ten characteristics of good teaching, which include more details about the structure of the teaching process, communication and differentiation.

In the study, reported on in this paper, quality of teaching is defined as teachers’ acknowledgement and management of learners’ individual interests and preconditions without relying only on disability categories. Quality is interrelated with and based on a broad approach toward learning, as learning is perceived as a mixture of personal, social and academic dimensions. Furthermore, quality of teaching is connected with teachers’ ability to teach according to both this multidimensional definition of learning *and* to their specific knowledge about individual differences. That means that quality also has to do with knowledge sharing and collaboration between different professional groups as well as with families.

Across special and inclusive education

In this section we will present the theoretical background for the development of the instrument for evaluating the quality of teaching practices in special schools. In the Nordic and European context educational reforms have been on the agenda since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Haug 2000); for instance school reforms with the purpose of transforming a highly segregated school system into the common and inclusive school for all children. The criticism was and still is directed towards the fact that the compensatory-oriented special education had difficulties in contributing to the aims of social justice and equity. The democratic-oriented principle of participation in general education became the dominant paradigm for social justice and for the development of both mainstream and special schools.

Researchers have participated in this transformation process and in the discussions about special education and inclusive education. Parts of the theoretical discussions have been influenced by a sociological critique of special education and thus of the teaching practice in special schools. In this critique the problematic sides of segregated provisions have been emphasized: injustice, marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion (e.g. Tomlinson 1982; Booth and Ainscow 1998;

Skrtic 1999; Slee 2011). Special education is here described as diagnostic, separative and help-based and has been problematized for drawing primarily on a psycho-medical knowledgebase. Based on psycho-medical research a range of teaching methods has been developed: Direct instruction, diagnostic prescriptive teaching and behavioral techniques (Hick and Thomas, 2008). This approach to teaching has been criticized as insufficient (Florian 2008; Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013a; Norwich 2013). Rather the provision of the right condition for learning in communities has been emphasized. The understanding of learning from sociocultural theory has underpinned the meaning of the context and culture of learning in the pedagogical debate in general. And as stressed by Hick and Thomas (2008), this focus has not been strong in the field of special education – as a consequence of special educators’ isolation in a particular part of the educational system. The context-oriented theory of learning - and thus a focus of teaching – has not played a significant role in the development of the practice of teaching in special schools.

The research debate on special and inclusive education rests on two assumptions: First, the debate is based on a presumption about a dichotomy between the practice of teaching in special education and in inclusive education, which means that teaching is seen as two different practices and types of professional knowledge bases. Second, what is going on in practices of teaching in special schools is primarily diagnostic-prescriptive and is not influenced by sociocultural theory of learning. Instead, special education is organized around types of impairment and the conventional wisdom is that teachers who work in specialist forms of provision use specialist teaching methods and procedures (Florian 2008, Florian & Graham 2014).

However, in recent empirical studies on teachers’ approaches in both segregated and inclusive settings it is found that the teaching methods are not as different as assumed (Egelund and Tetler 2009; Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013a). Teachers’ knowing, doing and believing in special needs educational settings draw upon many theoretical perspectives and these different perspectives are combined into complex patterns in response to learning situations in everyday classroom teaching (Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013b). Thus, the professional knowledge in special school teachers’ practices cannot solely be described as diagnostic-prescriptive. Rather, it consists of knowledge about how to teach pupils according to their individual needs and at the same time how to support their learning. This is related to what Corbett (2001) refers to as ‘connective pedagogy’ as it connects the learner with their own way of learning, thus connecting them with the curriculum.

It is an outset for the development of the instrument that the quality of teaching in special schools can be understood in the light of the quality of teaching and learning in general. Therefore, we suggest that the quality of teaching practices in special schools involves a combination of different theoretical and professional perspectives. The development of the instrument begins with this insight. Thus we problematize the assumption of a simple split between special and general education. Rather, we perceive this as a theoretical assumption in a debate on opposite values in special and inclusive education. In the practice of teaching this opposition does not seem to be the case (Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013a). Therefore, we have examined how teachers in special schools perceive the quality of teaching as our aim has been to develop an instrument for this group of teachers that make sense for them in their everyday teaching.

Method

The development of the instrument draws on research literature about the quality of teaching in special schools, the quality of teaching in general and on data from a two-day research seminar. The seminar included seven researchers from Aarhus University and 35 practitioners (principals and teachers) from 16 special schools. Thus, data includes schools for pupils diagnosed with multiple disabilities, learning difficulties, emotional difficulties, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The research approach was collaborative and used action research methodology (Bjoernsrud 2008). Within a phenomenological research approach (Giorgi 1985; Feldman 1994) the goal was to examine teachers' and principals' perceptions of quality in practice by using a narrative research approach (Boje 2001; Bjoernsrud 2008; Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013a). During the two-day seminar teachers and principals participated in three different workshops. As an introduction the practitioners were asked to articulate how they perceive quality in their practice of teaching.

In the first workshop the teachers and principals were divided into six groups and each group was asked to agree on influential and important indicators of quality in their own teaching practice. The research group joined the practitioners' discussions and reported them as data. The second workshop began with the practitioners' written narratives on situations of practice that, from their points of view, were 'good' learning situations. They were then interviewed in groups about their narratives and about the quality characteristics depicted in the situations. Below is one example of a narrative written by one of the participants, teaching pupils diagnosed with ASD.

It's morning and the school day is about to begin. We (the teachers and assistants) meet with the pupils every morning. We say hello and the pupils are prepared for the school day. Now the planned teaching is about to begin. The pupils are asked to split up and go to two different rooms. Three pupils are sitting around a table in one of the rooms. I tell them, what is going to happen. They are going to work with three assignments. First the recognition of specific words, then the letters 'd' and 'p' and finally they are going to read. The pupils are asked to go to their desks. Two of the pupils start to work with the assignments and they accept the help that we offer. The third pupil doesn't work. When my colleague approaches her, she says "No, no thank you" in an aggressive body language. She signals that she doesn't want to be interrupted. I try to approach her, but receive the same reaction. We instruct the two other pupils. Finally the pupil that did not work opens her book and starts working. She points at the words and pronounces the ones that she knows well.

This learning situation is an example of a dominant pattern in practice as it was expressed by the teachers. What is going on in this classroom is not that different than what is going on in mainstream classrooms. For the teacher the narrative is an example of a learning situation that meets her understanding of quality in teaching. She reflects on the narrative and verbalizes the quality as she sees it. She emphasizes that all the pupils - in the end - are working with their assignments and follow the instruction. She is not surprised that the pupil resists. She sees this as a part of her professional craft knowledge to work with the relations to the pupils and to approach - in collaboration with a colleague - individual pupils according to their needs during teaching. The narrative illustrates that teaching involves the ability to adjust to unforeseen

incidents, as for instance pupils' reluctance to work, and is an example of 'situated professionalism' (Hedegaard-Soerensen and Tetler 2011) as they observe, improvise, reflect and act in order to make situations successful. The narratives and the taped discussions are used as data.

Finally, in the third workshop the research team collected the most frequently occurring indicators from the first workshop and wrote them up on chart paper. These indicators were as follows: Pupils' well-being and life mastery; structuring of teaching and lessons; subject knowledge and learning; cross-disciplinary collaboration, and knowledge about the individual pupil. Then the participating teachers and principals were invited to discuss and write down examples from their own teaching practice that could be used as evidence of quality teaching. All discussions were taped, and the examples generated by the discussions became data.

Thus the data from these three workshops can be described as values, professional reflections and practice knowledge in relation to special school teachers' own understandings of quality in their professional practice. In the process of constructing an instrument we were able to incorporate indicators and sub-indicators that derived from the way teachers themselves phrased them and in a way, they could recognize them as making sense for them in their teaching practice.

In a subsequent phase of the study, we compared the analysis of the special school practitioners' own understandings of quality with international meta-reviews (Meyer 2004; Mitchell 2014) and research literature about teaching practice in special schools (Flem, Moen and Gudmundsdottir 2004; Berthén 2007; Beyer 2009; Tetler, Baltzer, Hedegaard-Soerensen, Boye, and Andersen 2009; Hedegaard-Soerensen 2010; Oestlund 2012, Dyssegaard and Larsen 2014).

We found that the variety of teachers' and principals' definitions of quality was very much in line with the criteria for 'good instruction', which Meyer (2004) outlined in his empirically based review of characteristics of 'good teaching' in general. Based on the above mentioned meta-reviews, research on teaching in special schools and data from the research seminar, the instrument was constructed, which follows a framework of seven main quality indicators, each with a range of sub indicators. Afterwards the participating teachers and principals from the seminar piloted the instrument by evaluating their own teaching practice, and they were interviewed about their experiences. According to their feedback the instrument was adjusted and finished.

The main indicators of the instrument

We have elaborated Meyer's ten criteria of good instruction¹ in order to decide on and organize the main indicators of the instrument, while the practitioners' understandings and descriptions of teaching quality in special schools represent the main source for the construction of the sub-indicators of the instrument. Thus some of Meyer's characteristics are replaced with others or are defined differently so they reflect the research literature about the field of special schools. In

¹ Clear teaching structure, high amount of time-on-task, climate conducive to learning, content clarity, meaningful communication, variety of instructional methods, individual support, intelligent exercises, clear description of goals to be achieved and well-prepared learning environment (Meyer, 2006).

particular the sub-indicators are elaborated and worded so they can easily be recognized by teachers in special schools. Thus the instrument consists of seven main indicators: a) the School's cross-professional collaborative relationships, b) the physical teaching environment, c) promoting a culture of learning, d) structuring of teaching and lessons, target setting and evaluation, e) management of teaching, f) individual considerations and differentiation, and g) pupil involvement. The first main indicator addresses both teachers and principals. The other six main indicators are only of interest to teachers. Below is a short description of each indicator.

Main indicator A: The School's cross-professional collaborative relationships

This indicator addresses several aspects of collaborative practice among professionals with different approaches to pupils' situations in the schools. This collaboration between different types of professionals is connected to the quality of special schools when the collaborative practices support pupils' learning and life mastery. The main indicator and associated sub-indicators are designed to support teachers' evaluation of the organization of collaboration and the collaborative practice itself including collaboration with specialists (e.g. speech therapists) and equally important collaboration among teachers, child care workers and classroom assistants (e.g. collaboration when teaching).

Main indicator B: The physical teaching environment

The quality of the physical environment influences pupils' learning outcomes, and therefore it is important to organize the physical environment to promote and support different educational objectives and arrangements of learning and teaching. For example many pupils with special educational needs experience physical restrictions with regard to accessibility to buildings and classrooms. Included in this indicator is an evaluation of the assistive technologies that are available for teaching (e.g. ICT equipment).

Main indicator C: Promoting a culture of learning

If pupils experience the learning climate positively, they are better able to show their abilities and interests and therefore improve their skills, academically, socially and personally. This indicator focuses on a learning climate characterized by mutual respect, rules that are followed, shared responsibility, equality and care for one another (Meyer 2004, 51). This indicator and the associated sub-indicators support teachers' evaluation of the classroom climate and the balance between the time spent on learning activities and on caring and supporting.

Main indicator D: Structuring of teaching and lessons, target setting and evaluation

This main indicator emphasizes the importance of the relation between goals, content and teaching strategies. The focus is on classroom leadership and development of a learning climate that communicates expectations for pupils' behavior and interactions, well-defines pupils' tasks, and makes a clear distinction between self-regulated and guided learning experiences. Among other things, it requires that all professionals are aware of their roles in both planning and instruction processes.

Main indicator E: Management of teaching

This indicator is about management of teaching with a focus on content clarity; for example, structuring content in well-defined tasks adjusted to pupils' individual pace, rhythm, and learning style. It is also important to consider if the variety of learning tools is sufficient to support the instruction with visual aids, illustrative teaching materials and concrete examples. Included in

this category is pupils' 'practicing' since it is important for pupils to practice emerging skills that are relevant to the goals they are working towards.

Main indicator F: Individual considerations and differentiation

This indicator supports teachers' reflections on the tension between the individual and the group. The dilemma is one of teaching all the pupils and at the same time teaching to the individual. Teachers face dilemmas in responding to pupils' experiencing difficulties and providing for all pupils without stigmatizing some as different. In evaluating this aspect of teaching it is important to consider whether individualized learning and collective learning is balanced, and whether a variety of methods and teaching strategies are used in order for pupils to collaborate with each other and have opportunities to take part in the learning community.

Main indicator G: Pupil involvement

The indicator concerns involvement and responsibility, which are important means for supporting individual pupils to develop personal and social competencies. Meaningful communication is central which means that teachers can talk to and negotiate with pupils about the meaning of goals and tasks in order for them to be involved and included in a participatory planning process, especially about their own individual educational plan and instruction. For example, do they influence the content? And are they able to relate the content to their everyday activities?

A culture of evaluation and improvement of practice

As it is stressed in research on professional development in schools (both mainstream and special schools) improvement of professional practice must take the point of departure in teachers' practice. The starting point for professional development should be teachers' situated professionalism (Hedegaard-Soerensen and Tetler 2011) and thus actions, professional judgements and reflections during teaching. Furthermore it is emphasized in research that the aim of the professional development must be teacher driven and not driven by the accountability agenda (Hardy 2010). In a teacher driven process of professional development the outset for improvement is teachers' craft knowledge about responding to individuals' difficulties (Florian and Graham 2014). Finally the quality of professional development will increase by using methods that instill strengths, confidence and capacity to teachers (Narian, Ferguson, and Thomas 2012). The approach to the development of the instrument is aligned with the research knowledge about professional development as mentioned. The indicators for quality are based on knowledge about the practice of teaching in special schools – across general and special education. The indicators are – as it was validated by teachers – recognizable for teachers as they mirror the teachers' professional values and traditions.

Thus the purpose of the instrument is to support a culture of documentation, evaluation and improvement of teaching practice according to predefined indicators of quality. Each indicator has a range of sub-indicators that targets different dimensions of quality. Teachers using the instrument will, for instance, find three sub-indicators under the indicator "Pupil involvement": 1) opinion-forming communication, 2) participation in lessons and 3) participation in target setting. Each sub-indicator includes descriptive statements for the teacher to reflect on. For

example, the sub-indicator ‘participation in lessons’ is clarified by the following statements (fig. 1):

Fig. 1

G.2. Participation in lessons	<i>(tick one box in each row)</i>			
	To a high extent	To some extent	To a less extent	Not at all
Pupils actively participate in the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils are motivated and show interest in the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils can draw on their own experiences during the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils can relate teaching to their own lives	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils influence the topics to be taught	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils influence the choice of materials and how they are used	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The starting point for teaching is pupils’ interests	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The starting point for teaching is pupils’ levels of ability	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils focus their attention on the teacher during the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

Teachers are offered the possibility to evaluate and improve the practice of teaching by considering whether the practice in special schools is aligned with the different descriptive statements in the sub-indicators. From these indicators teachers can be systematic in observing and evaluating their practice and can develop a professional language that can be shared². Through this process of common and collaborative evaluation teachers can actively assess and measure the practice of teaching against the different indicators.

Evaluation and improvement

Thus the instrument can be used to develop a culture of evaluation and improvement of teaching in special schools. As a part of the development of the instrument all participating teachers and principals were interviewed about their experiences with the instrument. The feedbacks from working with the tool unfold a variety of different perspectives:

²The instrument for evaluating the quality of teaching can be downloaded:

<http://edu.au.dk/index.php?id=42212&L=1>

The development of a shared professional language: The instrument is (seen from the views of the teachers who tested it) supporting the development of a professional language. In completing the tool teachers discovered and rediscovered the practical and partly tacit knowledge and in teachers' sharing of reflections about the relation between practice and indicators, the teachers are supported in unfolding and elaborating a professional language, for example about pupils' learning in relation to the learning environment and the practice of teaching. In this process the instrument supports the teachers in aligning the practical knowledge with a professional language. This supports a kind of teacher development in which teachers' concrete situated professional judgements about what is educational desirable is in focus (Biesta 2012). Developing practice from the outset of educational judgements or situated professional reasoning (Hedegaard-Soerensen 2013) offers teachers the possibility to teach in an educational way and not to draw of diagnostic-prescriptive methods and procedures.

The development of new professional approaches to teaching: Furthermore the teachers stress its supporting new dialogues and ways of reflecting on teaching. In discussions of both process and outcome of completing the instrument, teachers created a shared professional language about the knowing, doing and believing in the practice of teaching in specific educational settings and about the overall quality of the learning environments. Out of this reflection new approaches to teaching are able to occur. This is in line with the concept of 'didactic reasoning' (Aldrin 2015) as an important dimension of academic teacher development. The professional development can be accomplished through intersubjective meetings in which teachers' didactic voices can be nurtured.

The development of a culture of evaluation and improvement: Another purpose of the instrument is the creation of an ongoing culture of evaluation and improvement of practice. The instrument is - seen from the perspectives of the principals who tested it - an important outset for a collaborative and systematic evaluation and development of the teaching practice in special schools. Linked to the instrument supporting new dialogues and ways of reflection, teachers and principals stress that the instrument offers inspiration for talks about values and philosophies of teaching in special schools – and thus for improvements.

As quality in education is linked to expectations and values, teachers and principals are offered the possibility to examine whether the actual practice is aligned with the values shared by teachers and principals. This examination can be arranged in two different ways. One way of using the instrument for a general and systematic examination of the teaching practice implies that all teachers are completing the instrument. And thus a systematic analysis can be conducted by the teachers. This can - as it is stressed by some of the schools – provide inspiration for further development of the teaching practices. This involves an overall examination of practices at the school level. Another way of using the instrument for systematic examination of the practice of teaching involves teachers' emphasis on a specific predefined indicator for quality (e.g. Pupil involvement). Individual teachers or teams of professionals are offered the possibility to examine whether the everyday practice is aligned with the predefined statements in the sub-indicators and thus, the teachers can find inspiration in the instrument for improvement of practice.

Discussion

The study reported in this article has found that it makes sense to describe good teaching in special schools from the perspective of good teaching in mainstream schools. Thus, it makes sense to further explore the relationship between good quality teaching approaches and the notion of inclusive pedagogy which seeks to 'extend what is generally available to everybody as opposed to providing for all by differentiating for some' (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011, 183).

The instrument supports teachers in special schools to articulate their craft knowledge about responding to individual learner difficulties in the process of teaching, which is meaningful for teachers in special schools in their professional development and improvement of the practice of teaching. Furthermore, the instrument for evaluating the quality of special educational teaching can contribute to a view on the SEN-field as an integral part of mainstream education. This emerged in a follow-up study that focused on the kind of collaboration between special school teachers and mainstream school teachers about the development of inclusive learning communities in mainstream schools (Riis-Jensen, Hedegaard-Sørensen, and Tofteng 2014). In this study it was examined how knowledge derived from special educational settings can be included successfully in mainstream schools in developing inclusive learning environments. Not as a simple task of transferring knowledge, but a process of co-creation in which special educational knowledge had to be transformed in order to meet the needs of mainstream teachers in inclusive classrooms. In this study, the instrument was used as a tool for the special school teachers' articulation of their craft knowledge, but the instrument was also used as a platform, from which teachers from both special and mainstream schools were able to communicate and share knowledge about teaching pupils with a diversity of needs, interests and experiences.

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Fig. 1.

G.2. Participation in lessons	<i>(tick one box in each row)</i>			
	To a high extent	To some extent	To a less extent	Not at all
Pupils actively participate in lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils are motivated and show interest in the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils can draw on their own experiences during the lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils can relate teaching to their own lives	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils influence the topics to be taught	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils influence the choice of materials and how they are used	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The starting point for teaching is pupils' interests	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
The starting point for teaching is pupils' levels of ability	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4
Pupils focus their attention on the teacher during lessons	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4