

Educated for welfare services—The hidden curriculum of upper secondary school for students with intellectual disabilities

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Accessible Summary

- Studies show that very few students with intellectual disabilities get a job after secondary school.
- Most graduates end up depending on benefits and social services.
- The aim of this study is to understand this contradiction between the goal of employment and what actually happens.
- We found parts of secondary school and social security which hinder employment.
- Secondary schools prepare students for what they see as the most realistic future: a life on welfare and benefits.

Abstract

Background: In many countries, the goal of secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities is to transition to the labour market. However, research and reviews consistently show that employment rates are very low for graduates with intellectual disabilities. The aim of this article is to scrutinise the preparation for school-to-work transition in Norwegian upper secondary education and employment services to elicit what really goes on.

Methods: This article is an in-depth interpretation of two earlier published, empirical Norwegian studies of upper secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities and their school-to-work transitions.

Findings: Analysis of the characteristics of Norwegian upper secondary education identified a trajectory away from the labour market—reinforced by the social security and support systems.

Conclusion: Drawing on Argyris & Schön's (*Organisational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA, 1978) classic work on “espoused theory and theory-in-use,” the analysis identified a hidden curriculum based on a perception of “realistic” ambitions which pave the way for a graduate life consisting, mostly, of welfare services.

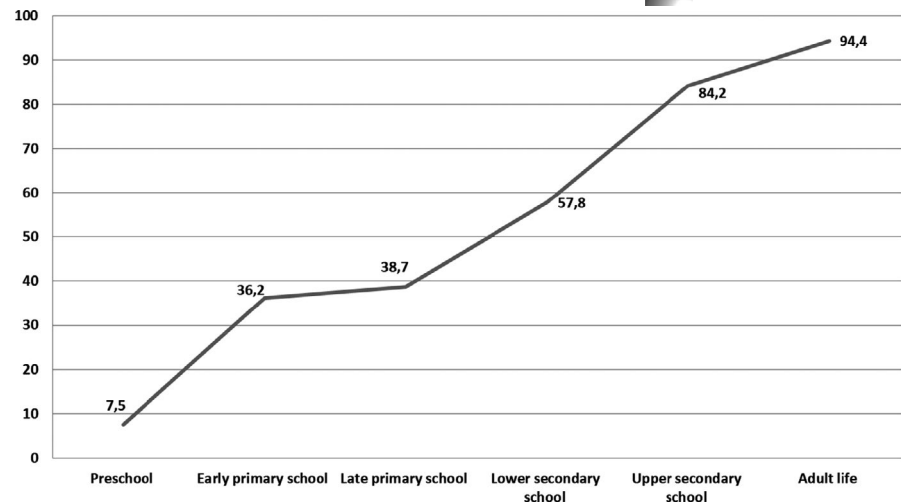
KEYWORDS

hidden curriculum, intellectual disability, school-to-work transition, street-level bureaucracy, upper secondary education

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FIGURE 1 Educational trajectory of intellectually disabled people. Per cent outside the regular classroom or workplaces. Preschool 1999, $n = 558$; early primary school 2003, $n = 448$; Late primary school 2006, $n = 392$; lower secondary school 2009, $n = 364$; upper secondary school 2012, $n = 241$, adult life 2015 $n = 17,560$ (population 18 years or older)



1 | INTRODUCTION

Most countries have a policy to increase employment for people with disabilities. However, employment rates are consistently well below that of the general population, typically 25%–40% lower (OECD, 2010). Research and reviews consistently show that employment rates are particularly low among people with intellectual disabilities (Parmenter, 2011; Verdonshot et al., 2009). Even though disability and employment support systems vary between countries, the extremely marginal position of people with intellectual disabilities appears to apply across the board (Arvidsson, 2016; Bush & Tasse, 2017; Hedley et al., 2017; McConkey et al., 2017), with employment rates three to four times below that of persons without disability, and if employed, it is often in sheltered and segregated settings.

There is limited research addressing why people with intellectual disabilities have such a marginal position in the labour market, but typically, the implicit assumptions are that this relates to the structure of the labour market (few low-skill jobs) and that employers are unwilling to employ this group of people. Research on employer attitudes does, however, show mixed results. Although the majority of employers appear to be reluctant to employ persons with intellectual disabilities, a minority is open-minded to their inclusion in the workforce (Olson et al., 2001; Unger, 2002). At 12 per cent of employers in Norway (Ellingsen, 2011), it is a noticeable minority, suggesting that there is substantial potential for increasing labour market participation for people with intellectual disabilities.

The aim of this article is to expand our understanding of this missed opportunity to exploit this open-minded attitude among some employers and explore the school-to-work transition for young people with intellectual disabilities. It is an in-depth analysis of two empirical studies focussing on upper secondary education and school-to-work transition among students with intellectual disabilities in a Scandinavian welfare state, Norway. Emphasis is placed on unpacking the institutionalised practices that, contrary to the

political intentions, lead to exclusion from the labour market for the vast majority of people with intellectual disabilities.

1.1 | The Norwegian setting

The ambition of “employment for all” is high on the Norwegian policy agenda, as in many other countries, and there is a general principle that social security should facilitate the “employment first” imperative. This means, for instance, that no one should be entitled to the disability pension unless all available activation measures have been exhausted (Social Security Act § 12-5). However, not all people with intellectual disabilities are considered employable, as this is a very heterogeneous group. Nevertheless, the official national policy since the deinstitutionalisation in the 1990s has been to increase the employment rate through measures such as supported employment or combinations of benefits and pay. Both official policy assessments documents (NOU, 2016) and research reports (Proba, 2016; Reinertsen, 2012) suggest a wide gap between possibilities and realities.

The Norwegian education system is considered to be inclusive; all state-run special schools were closed with the exception of schools for sign language students. The ideology was that special education should take place in the classroom setting together with peers at the local, regular school. However, as students with intellectual disabilities mature, most attend special classes at their local school or at a centralised regular school. Thus, students with intellectual disabilities spend most of their time outside regular classroom together with peers with similar special needs (see Figure 1). In relation to current inclusion terminology (Buchner et al., 2021, originally Pijl & Meijer, 1991), distinguishing between a *two-track approach* (special and regular school) and a *one-track approach* (inclusive education in mainstream school), Norway represents a *multitrack approach* with a variety of special arrangements within mainstream schools. For students with intellectual disabilities, the special class model is typical.

All Norwegian youth have the right to 3 years of upper secondary education, and in practice, nearly all young people with intellectual disabilities attend school until 19–20 years of age. Upper secondary school is expected to support the aim of employment for all, by providing a qualification and pathway for either admission into higher education or entry level for employment (preamble to the Education Act, Moljord, 2020). Students with intellectual disabilities are enrolled into both vocational and academic programmes in upper secondary schools, with the right to special education if they do not benefit sufficiently from adapted mainstream education. However, most students with intellectual disabilities attend special classes (alternative educational groups) (Wendelborg, Kittelsaa & Wik, 2017), regardless of study programme. Teaching in such groups is expected to focus on training for employment or for daily life skills (Wendelborg et al., 2017).

Figure 1 shows how students with intellectual disabilities embark on a trajectory towards exclusion—from preschools where a clear majority is included in ordinary groups to upper secondary schools where the majority attend special classes (84.2%), through to finally ending up excluded from the labour market as adults. The figures for the years in education are from a longitudinal cohort study of children with intellectual disabilities born 1993–1995 (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2014), whereas the figure for adult life is from a population-based register study of people with intellectual disabilities aged 18–66 years (Wendelborg et al., 2017). For persons not in mainstream employment, about 20% were in segregated sheltered employment, 50% attended day activity centres (a welfare service), 15% had no daytime activity, while the status of the remaining persons was unknown.

It is the aim of this paper to explore what takes place in the right-hand part of Figure 1, where the intended preparation for employment turns into a pathway to exclusion from the labour market, within the Norwegian policy context.

1.2 | Theoretical perspective

Our search for an in-depth, theoretical understanding of the discrepancies between official political goals for employment and the welfare careers of people with intellectual disabilities was triggered by an unexpected finding in the empirical study of Norwegian upper secondary education (Wendelborg et al., 2017). The administrator at one of the schools admitting students with intellectual disabilities asked, to clarify which students the research focussed on, if it concerned “the guests who visit upper secondary school before they are going back to the welfare services of the municipality” (Wendelborg et al., 2017, p. 99). This surprising perspective on students as just guests in regular school was further articulated in the response to a proposal about project collaboration directed to a county school authority. Inspired by Denmark,¹ a Norwegian foundation (SOR) has set up a project called “Helt Med” (Fully Included), with the aim of

supporting young people with intellectual disabilities into regular jobs, by matching willing employers and people with intellectual disabilities. The county school authority turned down the proposal, with the following explanation:

... The collaboration you outline does not fit with the mandate and steering of our schools. Following-up students in upper secondary school is a school responsibility. The schools both have the responsibility and the educational competence for the quality assurance of the programmes. [...] It is important for us that the education of these pupils is oriented towards a realistic final competence

(authors' translation).

There are two main observations that follow this response. Firstly, the county school authority stressed the responsibility of the schools. They did not want external actors to intervene in established working procedures. Secondly, they stressed the importance of *realism*: an understanding of *realism* appeared to be a guiding principle for the school practice replacing the official policy of labour market inclusion.

In our interpretation of the discrepancy between this guiding principle of realism and the educational policy, we draw on a set of theories addressing such discrepancies. Argyris and Schön (1978) make a distinction between “espoused theory and theory-in-use”, that is the possible tension between what people officially say they do, and a set of covert principles that in practice guide their actions. Their theory helps us understand the conflict between the official educational goals and the covert guiding principles of the school authorities. An interesting aspect of the tensions between espoused and used theories has been further explored by Lipsky (1980/2010) in terms of “street-level bureaucracies”, for example reinterpretations and adjustments of official policies and plans made by persons who are locally responsible for the practical implementation of the policy. The specific case of the discrepancy between espoused theories and theories-in-use in education has been analysed in terms of a “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968). Thus, Argyris & Schön's approach, together with the contributions of Jackson and Lipsky, provided the theoretical foundations guiding our analysis of career data of students with intellectual disabilities.

2 | METHOD

This paper is an in-depth interpretation of two earlier empirical studies published by the second two authors on education and school-to-work transition for students with intellectual disabilities in Norway. Firstly, a longitudinal study of families with children with disabilities born in 1993–1995 (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2014), with data gathered (qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to parents) at five points in time from children age between 3–5 and until the participants completed upper secondary

¹<https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/klapjob-employment-inclusion-people-disabilities/>

education (The Growing Up Study). Secondly, a study focussed on upper secondary education and the school-to-work transition for students with intellectual disabilities (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2018; Wendelborg et al., 2017). That study included quantitative data from national registers, parental and school questionnaires, and qualitative interviews with students, parents and teachers (The transition study).

In order to expand our understanding of the discrepancy between official goals of mainstream employment and the exclusion practices identified in the two studies, the authors carried out a focussed new interpretation in two steps. Firstly, a detailed interpretation of the teaching and learning of upper secondary school and the school-to-work transition was made in order to identify steps, clues and institutionalised covert practices that might support or undermine the transition. Information, illuminating steps and practices were systematically compared and organised thematically. Secondly, the identified patterns of information and themes were analysed further against the background of a family of theories explaining conflicts between official goals and identified practices in welfare services and schools. Interpretations, which were not supported by available information and themes, were rejected in line with the Formal Data Structure Analysis (Borell et al., 2012). Our analysis can be described as an interpretative and interactive process moving from in-depth data interpretation to theoretical understanding and back in several iterations, thus testing the heuristic value and credibility of the final interpretations. The Findings section will outline the most characteristic patterns of themes identified in the analysis, while the Discussion section subsequently elaborates on the theoretical understanding.

3 | FINDINGS

Our analysis of the Norwegian upper secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities identified a number of thematic characteristics, which together represent a trajectory away from the labour market and employment prospects. Firstly, we describe some clues, steps and institutionalised covert practices that might support or undermine the school-to-work transition and secondly, we present some contextual factors framing what the schools do, creating, what resembles a vicious circle. In fact, the thematic characteristics do not represent steps in a linear trajectory. The dynamics of the trajectory, *procedures of enrolment, focus of teaching and learning, school expectations, individual educational plans and regulations of welfare benefits*, interact in a circular way where each characteristic influence and are influenced by each other.

3.1 | Enrolment, gradual exclusion and choice of study programme

Almost all Norwegian students with intellectual disabilities are formally enrolled in regular upper secondary education programmes,

be it academic (preparing for higher education) or vocational. However, entry to upper secondary school for these students is associated with a number of assessments that underscore their differentness. Contrary to the ideals of an inclusive school, teaching in special classes at regular schools has become common since the turn of the century (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2019). As suggested in Figure 1, the school career implies a trajectory of growing exclusion, where the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities in special classes increases from 58% in lower secondary education to 85% in upper secondary education. Furthermore, the students in these classes are exempted from the regular national curriculum and educational ambitions, following instead an individual education plan (IEP) with few formal requirements (Moljord, 2020). A mother, who was interviewed in the transition study, confirmed that placement in the special class does not just have an administrative meaning. When photographs of the students were published in the school catalogue, she discovered that her son was not displayed together with mates in his study programme. There was a special section for students in special classes. She learnt that he belonged to another kind of “people”.

Although the students attend special classes, they are nevertheless enrolled in a regular study programme. Wendelborg et al. (2017) made the paradoxical observation that the educational programme where most intellectually disabled students were enrolled was the one preparing for higher education. This is unexpected as the students do not have the qualifications for such programmes, and this programme is shown to be less likely to lead to graduate employment for students with intellectual disabilities (Arvidsson, 2016). However, the probable explanation for this choice appeared to be that the timetable of the academic programme has fewer hours than the vocational programmes, that is the academic programmes were less expensive. Thus, the “choice” of programme appears to be guided by some kind of hidden agenda shaping the organisation of the set-up of education for students with intellectual disabilities, resulting in enrolment to a study programme preparing for a further education pathway they are unlikely to qualify for and with limited graduate employment prospects.

3.2 | Ambitions in teaching and learning

As students attend a programme preparing for higher education, most likely without the intention of qualifying for further education, the question that follows is what does the teaching emphasise? A significant number of parents interviewed in the Growing Up Study were frustrated because ambitions regarding skills in many subjects were lower than on the previous school level. In a comment on the IEP, two parents remarked:

[T]he focus on subjects in order to strengthen her in Maths and Norwegian disappeared. It was like: ‘We should be satisfied with what she has achieved’. So, when they wrote a new individual educational plan,

with LOWER goals than she had the year before, we made written comments on ALL her subjects.

Referring to the teaching and ambitions in upper secondary school, another of the interviewed parents concluded: "There is much baking and less contact with the professionals." Other parents complained that there was less interest in following up on their children's skills and that communication aids were less used in upper secondary school. A number of parents questioned the quality of their children's IEP. One mother was very surprised when she discovered that her son's current plan included learning to float, since he had been a good swimmer for years. She suspected that the individual goals were simply copied from another student. Another mother of a girl, who could not read, found that the IEP suggested that she should train in evaluating good and bad news on the Internet. The mother's confidence in the education deteriorated further when the response to her objections was that her daughter could just analyse the pictures. These examples do not mean that the majority of parents were frustrated, but that this tends to be the case among parents who continue to have high ambitions and expectations regarding their children's education (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2014, p. 53).

The general impression in the responses from frustrated parents is that ambitions and expectations from the upper secondary schools are low—they are not taken seriously. In the Transitions Study, schools were asked to what extent they prioritised social competence, basic skills, or subject knowledge in the education of students with intellectual disabilities (survey). Although many agreed that all aspects were important, social competence came out as clearly more important (67% strongly agree, 30% agree) compared to subject knowledge at the other end of the continuum (30% strongly agree, Wendelborg et al., 2017, p. 88). Of course, social competence is important in all kinds of settings, but the fact that it outranked typical educational goals by such a margin raises questions.

3.3 | The expectation divide

The transition study (Wendelborg et al., 2017) included questions for schools to assess their own and the students' ambitions and expectations concerning their education. Parents were asked similar questions. Responses suggested a wide expectational divide between schools on the one hand and students and parents on the other, and that both parties were aware of this. The schools had significantly lower expectations for the students' labour market participation than the parents and the students themselves. When the schools were asked to estimate their own as well as the students' and the parents' expectations of the students' real capacity, the schools answered that 32.5% of the students and 36.8% of the parents had expectations in line with the students' capacity. The corresponding figure for the schools themselves was that 74.6% had expectations in line with the students' capacity. Furthermore, the schools assessed more than half of the parents and one-third of the students as having "too high" or "far too high" expectations—thus

they were characterised as unrealistic, as opposed to the realism of the schools.

This attitude among the schools seemed to stem from a belief that parents, and to some extent the students themselves, had difficulties adjusting to a realistic level of the students' future opportunities. In an interview with two social workers supporting students with intellectual disabilities (at one of the schools), some of the parents' expectations were described as unrealistic, but understandable.

Some of them have very high expectations on the academic content of the schooling, while others have more extensive expectations on social competence. It can be very difficult for the teacher (...) if they have unrealistic expectations (...). Some parents can be against the special class, and this means that some parents simply don't manage to face their child's intellectual disability

(Wendelborg et al., 2017p. 105).

The expectation divide was also illustrated in the parents' perspectives on their children's schooling. The transition study showed that parents expected much more for their children's future than they perceived the upper secondary schools did. The difference is especially striking when it comes to ambitions for the students' employment participation, whereas more than two-thirds of the parents held the ambition that employment with support was possible, that applied, according to parents, to only one-third of the teachers.

Thus, there is a clear divide in expectations and ambitions between schools and parents, schools perceiving parents as *over-optimistic*. This is striking as a number of official public policy documents (white papers (Meld. St) no 18, 2010–2011; no 6, 2019–2020), public committee reports (NOU, 2016, No 17) and official expert group reports (Nordahl et al., 2018) have argued that ambitions and expectations in the education of students with intellectual disabilities, including upper secondary school, are far too low. Thus, the students' and their parents' expectations seem to be more in line with experts and official national educational goals. This becomes particularly intriguing as a number of studies have shown that students' own expectations positively affect their transition knowledge and skills (Shogren et al., 2018).

3.4 | Contextual facilitators

Drawing on Argyris and Schön (1978), the in-school focus and low post-school labour market expectations appear to be expressions of a *theory-in-use* preparing students for a life outside the labour market. While it may be tempting to blame the schools, it is also important to look at possible contextual factors that facilitate or produce the current state of affairs to obtain a more complete picture. These include (a) national curriculum goals, (b) the impact of the social security system, and (c) teachers' experiences of post-school transitions.

3.4.1 | Lack of national goals

There are no national curriculum goals for students with intellectual disabilities in Norway, and the issue is hardly raised in general education policy documents (Moljord, 2020). In their absence, the alternative is IEPs. Such tailored plans may facilitate individual accommodations, but may also leave the door wide open for ambitions based on what the school and the teachers consider to be realistic options. Many parents expressed frustrations regarding the ambitions of the IEPs (see above), and a Public Committee Report (NOU, 2016, no 17) confirms that the IEPs appear to be a formal piece of paper rather than an active teaching instrument. According to the report, more than 50% of the teachers respond that they use it to a “small” or “very small” degree (p. 62). In Argyris & Schön’s terminology, the schools’ *espoused theory* of individualised assessment and learning appears to turn into a practice where one easily slips on goals and ambitions. In short, the lack of a national curriculum and the system of IEPs seem to leave the schools and the teachers without clear goals and therefore left to rely upon their own experiences, judgements, and expectations.

3.4.2 | A fast track to welfare

Within the open space created by the lack of national goals, the social security and employment activation policies send a message about future expectations for students with intellectual disabilities. According to Wendelborg & Tøssebro (2018), more than 80% of young people with intellectual disabilities were on the disability pension in 2015, when leaving upper secondary school at an age of 18–19. From the age of 26 years, almost all received the disability pension and 97.3% received the full pension. These figures are out of keeping with the general work and welfare policies and regulations in Norway, where all available employment support measures should be exhausted before an individual is granted the disability pension. The regulations do, however, provide exceptions for, so called “obvious cases”—that is persons with very severe health problems. In the regulations, severe intellectual disability was until 2015 included in the example list of “obvious cases”. From 2015, the qualifier “severe” was omitted for people with intellectual disability (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2018, p. 68). Thus, the current regulations simply invite young people with intellectual disabilities and their parents to apply for the disability pension. They are exempted from the mandatory assessment of the individual’s capacity to work. The door to a life on benefits is wide open! This fast track to the disability pension also interacts with the practices of the employment support services, as people granted the disability pension are low priority for employment support measures (Spjelkavik et al., 2012).

3.4.3 | Teachers’ experiences of the transition

Expressed in another way, there seems to exist a predefined life trajectory for students with intellectual disabilities that is built into the

national social security and employment services. This sends a clear message to upper secondary schools. The issue was also addressed in the transition study, asking schools about their experiences regarding post-school daytime activities of former students with intellectual disabilities. More than 60% responded that the students, to a high or very high degree, were at social service activity centres or sheltered work (which is mainly segregated). Thus, it is understandable that most teachers see such opportunities as the most likely future for their students with intellectual disabilities.

Against this background, it comes as no surprise that the transition study concluded that preparation for employment is secondary, at best, in upper secondary schools for students with intellectual disabilities. The favoured strategy was to prepare students for the more realistic scenario, that is welfare services. Thus, there are a number of contextual circumstances discouraging upper secondary schools to prepare their students for mainstream work or supported employment. With a missing national curriculum, this leaves the door wide open for a *theory-in-use*, that creates a vicious circle where schools are “discouraged” to take a proactive role in school-to-work transitions.

4 | DISCUSSION

In this final discussion, we introduce more of the theoretical perspective in order to understand the goal-practice-gap.

4.1 | The hidden curriculum of Norwegian upper secondary school

Philip Jackson’s (1968) book, *Life in Classroom*, exploring the discrepancy between official goals and what is actually done in regular schools, illuminated how a classroom practice can be understood in terms of an educational theory-in-use or *hidden curriculum*. Working as an anthropologist in a foreign culture, with the aim of understanding teachers’ and students’ everyday life in school, Jackson did extensive participant observations in classrooms in Chicago and California. His aim was to explore what teachers really devoted their time in the classroom to and found that the teachers spent much more time training their students to learn “to wait” than they devoted to the teaching of the subjects in the official curriculum. The students learned to wait for their turn to answer a question, to start an activity, to wait for the teacher’s instructions, etc. Jackson suggested that the logic behind learning to wait and other similar unarticulated educational projects could be understood as expressions of a hidden curriculum, a curriculum that neither the students nor the teachers usually are aware of, but a curriculum that determines what actually goes on in classrooms.

Our interpretation of the Norwegian studies indicates similar driving forces in Norwegian education for students with intellectual disabilities. We argue that the schools’ low expectations or realism constitute a hidden curriculum. Thus, the gap between the

students' and their parents' expectations on the one hand and the schools' lower expectations on the other is not first of all an expression of over-optimistic parents and students, but the result of the school's hidden curriculum.

We are not arguing that the theory-in-use of the schools is groundless for all students with intellectual disabilities. On the contrary, given the diversity of capabilities and needs of different young people with intellectual disabilities, it appears as perfectly reasonable to adjust the official goals for a majority of the students in line with the hidden curriculum. However, the blind spot of this curriculum is that it runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy also for the students who might have opportunities for some kind of employment.

4.2 | Street-level bureaucrats and the gap between espoused and used theories

Lipsky's (1980/2010) theory of "street-level bureaucracy" shows how civil servants transform, and have to transform, official policies and goals to realistic practices in the encounters with clients or students. He studied what he called "the problematic place where government meets people". His analysis concerned teachers and other civil servants who interact directly with the citizens and who have considerable discretion in the execution of their official tasks with substantial influence on their clients' lives. According to Lipsky, this "problematic place" is generally characterised by lack of resources, conflicting goals and a need to adjust official goals and regulations to what is possible in the practical context of the execution of their work. One of the typical strategies of street-level bureaucrats is to modify the conception of goals and/or clients (p. 151 f) to be more in keeping with the service they are able to provide. In our context, teachers are street-level bureaucrats who, often without really being aware of it, adjust the national policy ambitions to what they find realistic according to their own understanding of intellectual disability. This adaptation occurs in a setting where social security and education policy send conflicting signals regarding expectations and ambitions, and where the IEP leaves the door open for the schools' interpretation of realism. This understanding is reinforced by the experience that students with intellectual disabilities are just "guests before going back to the welfare services of the municipality", thus constituting something that resembles a vicious circle. It is, however, not a circle in a strict meaning, but rather a web of interactions between the set of factors outlined in the Results section.

4.3 | The vicious circle

The image of a "vicious circle" is summarised in Figure 2. It is hard to identify an obvious starting point of the process, but the right-hand part illustrates contextual factors impacting the schools' perception of realism, and subsequently their ambitions on behalf of the students. The hidden curriculum appears to be created in the

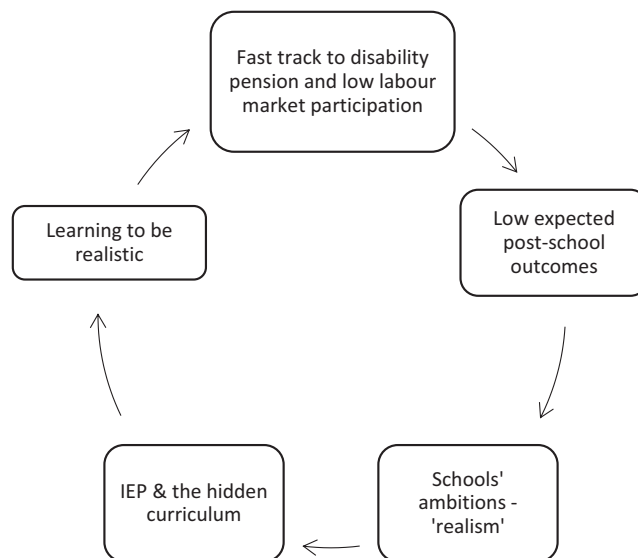


FIGURE 2 The vicious circle of school-to-work transitions for students with intellectual disabilities.

interaction between this idea of realism, the fast track to disability pension and the space opened by the lack of a national curriculum and the procedures of the IEPs.

The "learning to be realistic" element in the Figure goes partly beyond what is presented in the Results section but is included as it adds to our understanding of the vicious circle. The point is that the hidden curriculum teaches students that they are different and need to adjust their expectations. Here, we draw partly on Lipsky's theoretical analyses, and specifically the point that street-level bureaucrats are engaged in teaching service users appropriate client roles and realistic expectations, and partly on a set of studies of identity formation among students with intellectual disabilities. These address how students "learn to be realistic".

Studying Swedish upper secondary schools, Szönyi (2005) found an important ambition in teaching students with intellectual disabilities realistic adult roles and self-identities. One teacher shared his concerns:

Peter lacks awareness of his disability. I have been working with this for four years, but the parents resist [...]. It's a pity, I have told them. It is my great sorrow that I have not been able to reach them. Peter has a self-image as a person with special gifts. I am worried what it will be like for Peter to grow up out in the society, worried that he will not make it

(Szönyi, 2005, p. 177).

Two studies by Molin (2004, 2008) elaborated on this finding further. He found that a number of students entering upper secondary school refused to accept the deviant self-identities as students with intellectual disabilities. Three years later, the same students appeared much more compliant and positive towards the schools and their expectations for future life. Molin concluded that several factors could

have influenced the change. One could be a growing personal maturity, but there were also signs indicating that the students had given up their ambitions for an ordinary life and adjusted their expectations in line with the schools' expectations of the students' future in the welfare services.

Molin's (2004, 2008) and Szönyi's (2005) studies disclose an important aspect of what makes the hidden curriculum work. An important aspect of upper secondary educational processes concerns identity formation and a key function of schooling is that it explains how students internalise and carry out existing social role expectations. It is well known that the time of upper secondary education is important for the construction of individual's self-identity (Erikson, 1959). In a recent review entitled: *How do people with intellectual disabilities construct their social identity?* Logeswaran et al. (2019) summarised the new state of the art: "[D]espite most people being aware of their intellectual disability [...] the results from many of the studies suggest that it may not be considered an important part of their identity. Instead, they often focus on other attributes, roles, and competencies when describing themselves" (Logeswaran et al., p. 538). Thus, persons with intellectual disabilities manage both ordinary self-identities, corresponding to the ordinary life roles they are able to maintain and self-identities corresponding to the disability categorisations of relevance for their entitlement to access support and services. As a consequence, students with these disabilities need to learn to recognise and manage a diversity of self-expectations and self-identities. The discovery of the hidden curriculum indicates that upper secondary schools give priority to the disabled identity and risk to introduce the students into a vicious circle of self-fulfilling prophecies and exclusion from future work and meaningful employment.

We can now more explicitly elaborate our understanding of students with intellectual disabilities predetermined trajectory away from work to welfare services. Two major driving forces are identified. The first is the schooling into a one-dimensional disability role and self-identity. The second driving force is the set-up of disability services, including social security, that literally paves the way for students with intellectual disabilities to a welfare consumer role. Most probably, this one-dimensional schooling and the fast track to welfare benefits, teaches students with intellectual disabilities that they, first of all, are persons with intellectual disabilities and should give up over-optimistic life expectations and ideals for their adult life even if they feel that they could manage.

5 | CONCLUSION

A recent European study of inclusive education concluded that inclusive school settings are still rare for students with intellectual disabilities, even though more and more students attend mainstream schools (Buchner et al., 2021). The discovery of the hidden curriculum of "training for a realistic future" in Norwegian upper secondary school helps us understand how the multitrack special education approaches maintain school exclusion. As we have seen,

the schools and employment services act in good faith. Thus, breaking out of the vicious circle of low expectations and exclusion from the labour market demands a radically new perspective on upper secondary education, but also a considerable strengthening of the existing practice to create and really find work for young adults with intellectual disabilities, replacing the current open door to benefits. The relatively inclusive Norwegian upper secondary schools for students with intellectual disabilities offer a rare opportunity for such a restart.

A radical change of perspectives means introducing new educational goals and programmes oriented towards a diversity of adult roles, not just welfare consumption. Here, IEPs seem to lock the student into old models of thinking. Consequently, a clearer vision in national curriculum goals is needed. A broad professional discussion concerning real societal participation is necessary among teacher and school leaders, but also among professionals in the employment and welfare services. Here, recent research concerning how people with intellectual disabilities, themselves, engaged in managing ordinary life roles and self-identities must be taken into account and included in the training of teachers, school leaders and social workers. However, expectations and practices of the professionals will be hard to change if new, real opportunities for employment are not introduced. In fact, the discovery of the hidden curriculum indicates that the lack of expectations and ambitions in upper secondary school, to a large extent, depends on the school professionals' own experiences of not succeeding in introducing the former students into the labour market. Thus, the reform of upper secondary school also demands a reform of transition support into different employment pathways for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Further empirical studies are needed to confirm the relevance of the theoretical understanding of the hidden curriculum and covert institutional practices in different countries. The findings of such studies will also be of great value in future reforms.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing was not applicable to this article as no new datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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