Inclusion of Syrian students in need of special support in Norwegian schools - a qualitative study with students and parents

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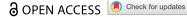Dima Mohamad[a], Anne Trine Kjørholt[b], Henri Valtteri Pesonen[a] and Luca Tateo[a]

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ABSTRACT

Despite the over-representation of immigrant children assessed as requiring special needs education, research into their social and educational experiences in the Nordics is limited. This qualitative study explored the experiences of five Syrian students in need of special support, and their parents in Norway. A thematic analysis was conducted using intersectionality theory and the social constructionist perspective. Analyses found that Syrian students had positive experiences at schools, with less academic pressure compared to their experiences in Syria, but poor peer relationships. Parents expressed varied emotions, including gratitude for not having to hide the special needs of their children, but uncertainty about how to seek help. Those conflicting feelings seemed to originate from the language barriers, different cultural traditions, and a limited understanding of the Norwegian educational system. Our findings contribute to the literature concerning the inclusion of immigrant students in need of special support and their families, emphasising the significance of culture, and advocating for their participation in both schools and research.

Introduction

More than 35,000 Syrians moved to Norway after the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011 including around 6900 families (Statistics Norway 2023). Differences in cultural traditions and educational systems present challenges in meeting the needs of immigrant children, especially those in need of special support due to psychological, physical, or learning difficulties (Pace and Sen 2018; Wærdahl et al. 2017). The intersection of communication difficulties, disability, language barriers, and other educational needs can lead to exclusion in society and schools (Jørgensen, Dobson, and Perry 2021; Porcelli et al. 2014). Children with special needs are often positioned in a vulnerable situation if the host country cannot accommodate their needs (Arfa et al. 2020).

'Students in need of special support' refers to students who cannot follow mainstream education and are entitled to extra support, including students of minority groups,

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students with special educational needs, and students with disabilities (White Paper 6. 2019–2020). The term 'children' also refers to the students in this study because they are under the age of 18 (UNCRC 1989).

Norway prioritises promoting inclusive education for all. The term 'inclusion' was introduced in 1994 following the UNESCO Salamanca Declaration (NOU 2009, 18). In this study, 'inclusion' refers to the act of involving all children, regardless of their ability, in mainstream schooling and social life; inclusion in this context describes a setting in which all children are offered a safe and welcoming space, and it is a necessary practice for safeguarding diversity and ensuring democracy (White Paper 6. 2019–2020). Attempts to meet the needs of students from minority language groups can be seen in the provision of alternative services, e.g. introductory classes focused on learning Norwegian and teaching in their mother language (The Norwegian Directorate of Education n.d). For students entitled to special education, several professionals can be involved in the development of individualised plans, e.g. the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (PPT), and Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Out-patient Clinic (BUP) (Norwegian Education Act 1998).

However, research shows that immigrant students are perceived as academically disadvantaged (Andersen 2023), with lower educational attainment (OECD 2023), higher dropout rates (de Wal Pastoor 2017), and are overrepresented in the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (White Paper 18. 2010–2011). Insufficient cultural awareness, language barriers, and marginalisation, can lead to delayed services for immigrant students with special needs (Arfa et al. 2020). Even though extensive efforts are made, some educational practices, including segregated and monocultural approaches to teaching, still result in the exclusion of immigrant students (Hilt 2017; Pihl 2002).

Children's experiences as socially constructed

To understand the experiences of immigrant families, their perspectives need to be sought and analysed through a culturally sensitive lens. In this study, we adopt the social constructivist perspective, which views individuals' beliefs as shaped by their cultural and social contexts (James and Prout 1990). Central to this perspective is the recognition of children's voices and agency, therefore we aimed to voice the students (Ogden 2014). However, agency is dynamic, contextual, and relational. Hence, it is important to consider parents' perspectives, given their pivotal roles in influencing their children's lives and enabling them to exercise their agency (Robson, Bell, and Klocker 2007). Furthermore, when examining the experiences of children with special needs, factors such as age, gender, and culture play crucial roles. A child with special needs may experience multiple challenges and being an immigrant can add a further dimension of vulnerability (Arfa et al. 2020; Czapka and Sagbakken 2020). An intersectional approach enriches qualitative analyses by capturing the multifaceted dimensions of individuals' experiences, moving beyond normative categorisations (Crenshaw 1991; Goethals, De Schauwer, and Van Hove 2015). This approach unveils the heterogeneity that would otherwise be overlooked by focusing solely on migrant status.

Some aspects of special education and inclusion in the Nordics have been explored in previous studies (e.g. Berhanu 2011; Jónsson 2016; Lempinen 2017; Magnússon 2020;

Ogden 2014), as well as introductory classes for immigrants (e.g. Hilt 2017). However, there is a scarcity of studies specifically examining the inclusion of immigrant students in need of special support (Jahnukainen and Kalalahti 2023). Notably, few studies considered the perspectives of both children and parents. Our study aimed to address this gap by investigating their perceptions on how Norwegian schools meet the needs of Syrian students requiring special support. We sought to answer the following questions: (1) How do Syrian students in need of special support and their parents experience access to educational support? (2) How do Syrian students in need of special support and their parents experience social inclusion?

Methods

Qualitative data production involved activity-based interviews (Jenkin et al. 2015) with students, and semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman 2009) with parents. The qualitative design provided a unique insight into participants' thoughts and experiences (Hamilton and Bowers 2006). Also, students with a variety of interests, abilities, and backgrounds could be meaningfully included in research using a combination of methods, encouraging them to share their experiences (Grant 2017).

Participants

A purposive snowball sampling procedure was used to recruit participants who were: (1) first-generation immigrants from Syria; (2) students aged 10–18 years receiving special school-based support; (3) and the parents of these students (See Table 1). Meetings took place at participant homes between November 2020 and March 2021. Recruitment was challenging due to the COVID-19 public health restrictions. Health and relief services for children and young people in one municipality and one NGO were contacted to support recruitment but without success. The safest means available to maintain contact with others, was then assessed to be social media. Information about the study was shared in a Facebook group for Arab immigrants in Norway, inviting people to contact us if they met the inclusion criteria. Following conversations with several mothers, one family was identified for participation. The mother from this family assisted in reaching others, resulting in a final sample of five families, categorised as two groups: (1) students aged 10–18 years, receiving special support at schools; (2) the parents of students in group one. All students attended school in Syria prior to arrival in Norway. Although families referred to each other, they participated independently. They were loosely connected through the informal Syrian network.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD Ref:185608) and complies with ethical guidelines and principles of informed consent, anonymity, and transparency. Our ethical commitment implied creating spaces of dialogue, being sensitive and true to the voice of all participants, who guided the

Table 1. Participant Information.

Name (Gender)	Age (years)-on arrival to Norway	Age (years)- time of study	Reason for special support	Family structure	Parents' education
Lama (Girl)	8	12	Learning difficulties	2 older siblings	Bachelor (mother) High school (father)
Sam (Boy)	10	13	Speech	1 older sister	Bachelor (mother). High school (father)
Rami (Boy)	8	11	Chronic condition	2 older siblings	High school (both)
Sara (Girl)	11	15	Chronic condition	1 younger brother	Bachelor (both)
Noor (Girl)	9	13	Limited Mobility	2 older siblings	High school (both)

Table 2. (meetings, themes, and tools).

Meeting	Participants	Themes	Tools
1	Whole family	Introduction of the study. Consent.	Informed consent forms
2	Parents	Family composition. Home country. Social life in Norway.	Interview guide
3	Students	Home country Social life in Norway	Interviews (Photo-lists)
4	Students	Social activities at school	Interviews (Photovoice-diaries)
5	Parents	School services, Communication with teachers Barriers.	Interview guide
6	Students	School experiences Special support.	Interviews (Photovoice, Hei tool)

researcher along the process of understanding (Kjørholt 2012). The research relationships were built on trust by respecting participants' request not to record the interviews. Having an Arabic-speaking researcher to collect the data facilitated rapport-building and comprehension of language expressions. Although all participants were from the same country, Syrian culture varies across different cities and regions in Syria. It was important to regard the participants as being the experts in their lives and to enter each meeting as an explorer. To enhance the reliability of data interpretation, as well as comprehensiveness and transparency, analyses resulted from multiple discussions between the authors.

The first author (a native Arabic speaker) met with each family six times, each meeting lasting between 45–60 minutes. Having the opportunity to spend an extended period with the participants enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences compared to what could be obtained from a single interview (Punch 2002). Activity-based interviews (Jenkin et al. 2015) were conducted, utilising different tools with the students: verbal (Hei tool) developed by Kristin Sommerseth Olsen and Guro Winsnes (Helsestasjonsbuttikken n.d); visual (Photovoice) (Johnson 2011); written (diaries and lists) (Grant 2017); and semi-structured interviews were used with the parents. By using activities during meetings with students, our goal was to enhance communication and encourage them to share their experiences, with no intention to specifically interpret the utility of source materials. Parents were clear that recordings of the meetings, and photos of activities with their children, were not permitted. The theme of each meeting was predetermined (see Table 2).

Data analysis

Two families consented to have meetings recorded with the parent groups but not with the student groups. Transcriptions of recorded meetings were completed immediately after each visit. For unrecorded meetings, detailed notes were taken during the sessions and supplemented by additional notes written immediately after the visit to ensure the recall of as much information as possible.

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted, whereby interpretations were based on identifying patterns within the data, leading to the final themes and conclusion. The aim was to conduct a cohesive analysis rooted in the data itself. We followed the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019):

(1) The first author read the data materials several times, making notes to discuss with the second author.
(2) Initial codes were created (e.g. uncertainty about parenting styles, lack of information, mixed feelings, unpleasant memories, loneliness, misunderstanding). Data that informed initial codes were translated from Arabic to English to facilitate discussions and revisions with the second author.
(3) Following agreement on initial coding, the first and second authors grouped codes to create themes. Data linked to each theme were combined, followed by an exhaustive evaluation of the data, to generate comprehensive themes based on participant perspectives. Themes and sub-themes were discussed and compared to the coded data.
(4) Selected quotes from participants were extensively discussed and documented to support the identified themes. All authors evaluated and approved the themes in relation to the data and quotes.
(5) Each theme and subtheme was given a title.
(6) Findings were written following extensive discussions between all authors to provide comprehensive and transparent conclusions.

Findings

Three main themes and eight sub-themes were identified from analyses, these are presented in Table 3. Each of those will be considered in more detail alongside participants' own words.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Cultural differences	The construction of childhood and special needs.
	Differences in parenting practices.
Social life	Challenges to social inclusion.
	Loneliness and friendships from the same ethnicity.
	Students' favourite places.
Educational experiences	School system in Norway.
	Barriers to accessing information and services.
	The significance of language.

Cultural differences

The construction of childhood and special needs

Participants often highlighted differences in the understanding, acceptance, and attitudes towards individuals with special needs between Syria and Norway:

> In Syria, we tried to hide the fact that our child has a special need, we wanted her to live a normal life . . . But it is different here. Here we know many families who are raising a child with special needs. I am sure this is not because there are more cases here than in Syria, but because no one hides it here. (Lama's mother)

Students noticed the difference as well, mentioning that there is less academic pressure to satisfy teachers' high academic expectations or overwhelming school demands:

> I like that they ask me if I had a good time during the weekend and if I got time to play instead of asking if I studied, as my parents do, my parents know that I need more time than my siblings to understand school's subjects and they always wish me to study more (Lama)

Participants acknowledged that Norway offers more resources to assist children and has a greater understanding of their special needs. However, they emphasised the importance of attaining a degree:

> I see that teachers are more concerned about how he is spending his free time or if he has friends outside school, but we do not get much feedback regarding the academic results, I mean. . .in the end, he needs to have a degree. . . (Sam's mother)

> The teacher is happy when I do activities with my classmates, but my mother is happy when I read or do homework, I also learn when I play!. (Sam)

In Syria, children are expected to comply with adult demands, considered as dependent, and as 'investments' for the future. Consequently, concerns arose about their academic progress, and future ability to secure sufficient stability to care for their ageing parents.

Differences in parenting practices

Parents felt it necessary to provide special attention to meet the needs of their children, potentially perceived by children as a form of control:

> My parents are always concerned whenever we have a trip organised by the school, even when the school confirms that there will be someone to assist me, they are still worried and sometimes my mother says she wishes she could go with me! I am not a child anymore! (Noor)

Parents also expressed difficulties in accepting interference from several professionals regarding their family life. In Syria, parents are considered the primary authority and influence over their children:

> It is sometimes stressful because I feel that I must consult with everyone to not be misunderstood, and if I do not, maybe I will be perceived as a bad mother and probably the child welfare service will knock the door. (Rami's mother)

However, some parents perceived this differently, describing the ability to consult with experts as reducing the challenges of parenting in a new country:

> My child has a difficult temper, and because of his speech difficulties, he refused to go to school for a while and took a longer time to acquire the language than his siblings. So, from the beginning, I met with his teachers and explained that we want him to go to school and participate in all activities, but he rejects, and they understood that. I believe that the fact that we initiated contact with the school, built trust between us, and I never felt afraid that my child would be taken away from me. (Sam's mother)

An important observation within this theme underscores the intersectionality of factors that shape participants' experiences, where parents who reported positive experiences also reported facing fewer language-related challenges as they had existing English skills and higher education.

Social life

Challenges to social inclusion

Participants described social communication and emotional support as crucial components they currently lacked. Sam's parents faced unique challenges as newcomers to a country where they had no contacts. This situation was especially difficult for them, as they were worried about how Sam, who struggles with speech difficulties, would adapt to learning Norwegian:

> The first year was very difficult, my child did not have friends and he came home every day from school complaining that he did not understand the jokes that other children made. (Sam's mother)

It also appeared that some parents faced challenges in adapting to the new culture and social norms, potentially resulting in the unintentional impediment of their child's inclusion:

> We got little attention and our anxiety over the changes that happened in our lives upon displacement and immigration is not fully supported as it should be. Maybe they think that we should feel better once we arrive in Norway, but in fact, we have experienced a new set of challenges upon arrival. (Rami's father)

The impact of cultural and linguistic barriers on participants' social inclusion, particularly when the child has special needs is evident in their statements.

Loneliness and friendships from the same ethnicity

Feelings of social acceptance and developing close friendships were highly influenced by interactions with peers during the child's free time:

> One day I was with my mother at the shopping centre, and we saw my classmates there, I got so angry and sad because no one invited me. I still feel bad when I remember. (Sara)

Perceived cultural differences seemed to impact students' feelings of inclusion; parents experienced challenges in establishing contact with Norwegians, with consequences for their children, who did not appear satisfied with having more Arabic than Norwegian friends:

> We grew up in totally different worlds. There are very few things to talk about. Burdens and stresses in life connect people, and we do not share the same stressors. (Rami's father)

> I do have friends, and we speak Arabic together, I do not like speaking Arabic a lot, we live in Norway, and we must speak like everyone. (Sara)

Participants' accounts highlight the challenges they faced in navigating cultural differences and fostering meaningful connections within Norwegians.

Students' favourite places

Students reported that their favourite places and activities included swimming and skiing. When asked about a memorable day or recollection from their time in Norway, Sam said:

> I remember the day I finally could ski like my classmates; we created a group and each of us showed our skills and how they could do different skiing moves. It was the first day I felt I had many friends.

Students recognised that sharing locations and activities with friends contributes to the development of solid friendships. This was supported not only by the examples of children who expressed their enjoyable skiing and swimming experiences but also by unpleasant experiences of those children who could not participate in similar activities due to their special needs:

> I do not have many friends, and there are not many places to go with friends anyway, I cannot hike or ski like others, so I spend weekends on my own. I can swim but only for a short time, so I do not go with the class to the swimming pool. (Rami)

It appears that limited opportunities for social participation due to various limitations, lead to feelings of loneliness.

The educational experiences

School system in Norway

Some parents and students believe that segregation-based special education is not the best option:

> We do lots of teamwork projects and activities, and I must be absent from school sometimes because I have regular appointments at the hospital, so when I come back, I feel I am falling behind, and it is hard to catch up with the progress that happened when I was absent. I also need extra help in Norwegian, so I must be out of the class two times a week and I always feel I need help to stay updated with the class activities, this annoys me sometimes. (Sara)

All students joined, and reported benefitting from, the introductory class for 1–2 years, the focus of which is on teaching the Norwegian language and culture. They described experiencing the introductory class as a safe place to practise Norwegian, as all children have newly arrived:

> No one made jokes of one of the ways one speaks because we were all new and still learning the language (Sam)

Participants support a mix of in-class and out-of-class teaching and supervision with specialists, and see that introductory classes serve as inclusive spaces where newcomers can navigate the culture and language without fear of judgement.

Barriers to accessing information and services

Parents mentioned that some municipalities are better equipped than others, and that access to information and a clear intervention plan is not uniform across all municipalities:

> I was lucky to get the help we needed fast, I know people waited so long to get their child diagnosed due to a lack of specialists, especially in small municipalities (Sara's mother)

Parents highlighted that there were delays in receiving assessments, the assignment of a special education teacher, and that they desired more regular updates about their child. Communicating with teachers and other professionals was also challenging, with the system described as fractured and difficult to access. Delays and monocultural practices contributed to these difficulties:

> We were treated as if we were experts in the system, but in fact, even simple things like how to schedule an appointment with a family doctor caused us anxiety. We were unsure who to contact if our child had a problem at school, whether it was the teacher, the school nurse, or the family doctor. We had no idea who to ask or what to ask for, and we had no understanding of what our child was entitled to. (Rami's father)

However, some challenges could also be attributed to students' personal characteristics.

> I do not like it when the speech specialist takes me out of the classroom to talk to me, some of my classmates begin to say, oh were you in therapy? What do you do there, they do not understand that I just need more time than them to speak. (Sam)

As they want to feel as capable as their peers, they may dislike having special needs education during the school day. This could present challenges for the teacher in delivering special education, leading to reduced benefits for the student.

The significance of language

Language was a common challenge impacting social and educational experiences. Without local friends, it became difficult to practice language skills. Without fluency, it seemed challenging to establish friendships.

> It is hard to learn the language if you do not have local friends and it is hard to get local friends if you do not speak fluently so we have been stuck in this circle for a long time. (Rami's mother)

Although people of immigrant backgrounds in Norway have the right to an interpreter, parents reported that interpretation services were not always available, which in turn led to confusion about how to seek support. Furthermore, the presence of an interpreter had a limited role in alleviating the language barrier due to the lack of consistency of interpreters used in meetings, and in their limited understanding of the situation. Parents stated that inadequate translation assistance and a disparity in the perception of disability and childhood hindered their communication with teachers and other professionals:

> Everything is in Norwegian; we do get a translator most of the time, but I wish I could communicate directly or find an Arabic-speaking teacher at the school that I could communicate with on a regular and simple base. (Rami's mother)

The students also identified language as a challenge. For instance, they expressed how they were excited about moving to a new country but also concerned about not knowing the language:

> I remember the day my parents said that we were moving to Norway. We were all very happy and my parents were saying that we will finally be in a safe place. I was also happy until they started to talk about the new language, then I asked them, how am I going to talk with people and go to school, and I started to cry. (Noor)

The different Norwegian dialects were also perceived as a challenge and impacted students' social interactions and school experiences.

> I still sometimes cannot understand all the jokes my friends make, they speak quickly and use some words that I have not learned at school, my mother tells me that it is normal, but it is still annoying for me. (Sam)

Participants emphasised several changes they would like to see: less bureaucracy; more consideration of cultural differences relating to parenting and understanding of having special needs; increased efforts to enhance children's social connection with Norwegian classmates beyond the school context.

Discussion

This study explored the social and educational inclusion of Syrian students in need of special support and their parents. Our study contributes to the understanding of an overlooked topic and encourages children's participation in research by involving them as primary informants alongside adults. Combining student and parent interview data provided a deeper understanding of students' experiences. We discovered that culture and children's special needs intersect and impact immigrants' inclusion. These findings call for transparent cross-cultural collaboration between students, parents, and teachers.

Our findings support the application of social constructionist perspectives as invaluable when researching children's lives (Franck and Nilsen 2015; James and Prout 1990). The different conceptualisation of children's roles between Syria and Norway impacted participants' experiences in many ways. For example, the perception of children as having agency in Norway may define social norms of parenting practices, child behaviour, and interactions that immigrants might not be able to meet (Franck and Nilsen 2015; Kjørholt 2005). In Syria, emphasis is placed on discipline and academic achievement, while in Norway the focus is on autonomy and freedom. As a result, parents in this study generally viewed cultural differences as a challenge to their authority (Nshom et al. 2022); and students faced challenges in balancing parental expectations, adapting to Norwegian culture, and fulfilling the demands of both cultures.

The findings emphasise the importance of listening to both students and their parents (Arfa et al. 2020), as some tensions were observed between the respondent groups. For instance, parents expressed more concern about academic achievement while their children were more concerned about building friendships. Professionals working with students need to understand this tension and its origin. Efforts should be directed towards evaluating the intersecting factors that shape the social context within which students' experiences are constructed. Establishing transparent communication with both parents and students is essential to developing an educational plan that effectively addresses the diverse needs of these students (Dudley-Marling 2004; Jørgensen, Dobson, and Perry 2021).

Furthermore, this study revealed that beyond the school context, social life was considered weak, characterised by a sense of exclusion and few connections with Norwegians. Social support significantly influences family well-being, particularly in those including children with special needs (Arfa et al. 2021; Jennings, Khanlou, and Su 2014). Previous studies argue that the transitional period, with exposure to a new culture and language, can impact the feeling of being included (Jørgensen, Dobson, and Perry 2021; Strømme et al. 2020). For the participants in this study, social inclusion proved to be shaped by intersecting factors such as language barriers, special needs, and disparities in cultural norms. Engaging with nature and outdoor life is linked to the development of a healthy childhood in Norway, which might lead to a sense of exclusion among children with special needs who cannot participate in such activities (Nilsen 2008). We found that the construction of nature and outdoor life as core components in child development in Norway had its implications. While students recognised the value of sharing outdoor activities (e.g. skiing or swimming) with Norwegian peers, it could be difficult for them to access such activities, especially when the student had limited mobility. Students reported how they felt included when participating in those activities as they could spend time with peers outside the school time, underscoring the need to arrange activities sensitive to children's special needs.

In terms of educational experiences, students with special needs in Norway receive education in mainstream schools, and Special education is offered in the form of out-of-class activities and teaching (Wendelborg and Tøssebro 2008). When inside-class support is required, it is provided by assistants who may not have a special education background (Wendelborg and Kvello 2010). Participants in this study preferred a combination of in-class and out-of-class teaching. Practices such as group-based learning, introductory language classes, and having an Arabic-speaking contact person at school, proved extremely helpful. Language proved to be significant in relation to other aspects, we found that children with good Norwegian skills seemed to experience more inclusion at school, creating a big challenge for students and parents, especially in the first year after migration. This aligns with previous findings that fluent Norwegian skills were a prerequisite to gaining knowledge about how different systems operated (Heino and Lillrank 2022; Jørgensen, Dobson, and Perry 2021; Olsen 2018).

Students' preferences for speaking Norwegian and participating in activities like skiing suggested a desire to conform to Norwegian cultural norms. This could be a result of a perceived pressure to adopt the dominant language and practices to be accepted (assimilation). It could also be an attempt to integrate by embracing the prevalent language and activities. However, this problematises the concept of inclusion and whether the difficulty in respecting cultural and linguistic diversity has resulted in inclusion practices being a type of assimilation of minorities (Sinkkonen and Kyttälä 2014).

Despite the diverse experiences, common patterns were identified. The findings demonstrated how the intersectionality of various factors, such as language barriers, special needs, and culture impact students' inclusion (Crenshaw 1991; Crock, McCallum, and Ernst 2011; Emery and Iyer 2022).

Limitations

The study has its limitations. Our sample is not representative of the Syrian population in Norway. Nevertheless, the aim of conducting this qualitative research was to explore in-depth perspectives of individual experiences rather than to generalise findings. Moreover, while snowball sampling is common in qualitative research, it can pose a risk of methodological bias. Future research could explore alternative sampling techniques to minimise the impact of familial connections. However, confidentiality regarding the responses shared by each family was maintained and findings demonstrated diverse experiences and rich data. Furthermore, not all meetings were recorded, and no photos of the activities were taken, but we prioritised respecting participant preferences. Having only one Arabic-speaking author could be considered a limitation; however, it removed the need for a translator. To mitigate bias in interpretation, we had frequent discussions and feedback meetings, and all participant statements used were discussed multiple times. This study focused on the experiences of students and parents, however, many important aspects of special education were not addressed and should be further explored in the future, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Conclusion

To recognise diversity and encourage inclusion, monocultural education needs to be disrupted. This entails acknowledging minority language children with special needs as members of communities with cultural, and educational needs distinct from but comparable to those who belong to linguistic and ethnic majorities (Pihl et al. 2018).

Our study shows that factors such as segregation, language barriers, diverse cultural practices, and a limited understanding of the educational system hinder inclusion and contribute to parental insecurity. These issues are not exclusive to non-Arabic countries, but are also observed in Lebanon, where Arabic is the native language; however, the education system differs, and schools teach various subjects in French or English (Crul et al. 2019).

The concept of inclusion is complex, and we might not understand its complexity until we are involved in the practical implementation of inclusive practices (Berhanu 2011; Sundqvist and Hannås 2021). There are many differences between schools and municipalities in Norway (de Wal Pastoor 2017) that are worth investigating to explore what makes some schools and municipalities more inclusive. More research focused on special needs in the migration context is needed (Hanssen, Harju-Luukkainen, and Sundqvist 2023; Heino and Lillrank 2022), including the reflexive examination of the individuality and uniqueness of people's experiences (Tateo 2016). In light of our findings, more efforts should be given to hear the voices of students and parents, to establish communication with them, and to get insights into their experiences. It's essential to distinguish between assimilation and inclusion to prevent discrimination against immigrant students needing special support. This underscores the importance of planning culturally responsive teaching practices and creating inclusive classrooms that embrace diversity.

This study acknowledges the different support services offered to Syrian students in need of special support in Norway, which are appreciated by students and parents who participated in this study. However, it raises an important concern as it shows that until mastering the Norwegian language, accessing these services is difficult, and related information is unclear. The question raised, in need of further investigation, is to what extent, and in which way, can we consider it a successful inclusion, when language mastery is a prerequisite, yet unrealistic when the service receivers are newcomers in need of special support?

Acknowledgment

Disclosure statement

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