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What Are Priorities and Didactic Choices of Teachers at Schools for Swedish Students with Intellectual Disability?—A Study of Teacher-Initiated Professional Development in a Swedish Context

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Abstract: This article presents findings from an ongoing project focused on teaching in Schools for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (SSIDs) in Sweden. Methodologically, the project employs professional development circles as a collaborative working method, aiming to bridge the gap between research and practice by facilitating dialog between teachers and researchers. Through qualitative content analysis of data collected from these circles, the study delves into professionals' instructional priorities and didactic choices, offering insights into how teachers adapt instruction to meet students' diverse needs and prerequisites. By fostering knowledge exchange and shared knowledge production, the project aims to support school development and enhance teacher professionalism in SSIDs.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities; didactic choices; teachers' professionalism

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a goal shift in education for students with intellectual disabilities, emphasizing academic outcomes alongside functional skills (Moljord, 2017; Shurr & Bouck, 2013). In this broader context, Swedish education for students with intellectual disabilities has also undergone significant changes, with the introduction of new curricula that focus more on academic content (SOU 2021:11, 2021). These changes bring new challenges for schools serving students with intellectual disabilities, including heightened expectations of students' performance and the need to provide instruction that is both meaningful and adapted to individual needs.

In Sweden, according to the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800, 2010), students who do not meet the knowledge requirements of compulsory school due to an intellectual disability have the right to education according to curriculum for Compulsory Schools for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (CSSIDs), which modifies and reduces subject content. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) defines intellectual disability (ID) as significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, affecting reasoning, learning, problem-solving, and everyday practical skills, originating before age 18 (AAIDD, 2010).

Within CSSIDs, approximately 14,400 students are enrolled (SNAE, 2022), of which, about 5400 students with moderate and severe intellectual disability receive education in subject areas rather than subjects. In the same way, Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (USSSID) is structured regarding national programs focusing on vocational training and individual programs, which provide education carefully adapted

to students' varying prerequisites. Approximately 6540 students were enrolled in USSSIDs during the 2020/2021 academic year, of which, about 2800 received education within the individual program (SNAE, 2021).

The educational CSSID settings are often segregated from mainstream education, but 18% of students with ID in compulsory education are educated in mainstream settings, according to curriculum for CSSIDs, and are thus integrated into mainstream education. The proportion of students receiving education in CSSIDs has varied over time, and the latest statistics (SNAE, 2022) indicate an increase from 0.98% in 2017/2018 to 1.29% in 2021/2022.

By employing Biesta's (2011) three educational dimensions—qualification, socialization, and subjectification—as a comprehensive framework, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of effective education practices. Biesta's framework offers a nuanced perspective, amplifying the voices of teachers and their viewpoints on what constitutes effective education, particularly focusing on student security and relationship building, which aligns with Platin Ewe's (2021) emphasis on relational pedagogy and trust-building in teacher–student relationships. It encourages reflections beyond standardized assessments, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of education and the importance of integrating socialization and subjectification dimensions. Teaching in CSSIDs and USSSIDs is characterized by a multifaceted educational mission. The qualification domain is evident in the aspiration for academic knowledge attainment among students with intellectual disability, reflected in the shift towards academic focus in teaching methods. There have been significant changes over several decades in the perception of the knowledge needed by students with intellectual disability. In recent years, education for students with intellectual disabilities (IDs) has shifted from a primary focus on functional skills, such as dressing or navigating public transportation, to an increased emphasis on academic knowledge (Browder et al., 2003). This shift aligns with broader educational reforms in Sweden and other countries, emphasizing both qualifications and the holistic development of students. However, to be effective, this shift must balance academic rigor with inclusion, self-determination, and the development of functional skills, ensuring students thrive socially, academically, and practically.

This article explores the challenges and intricacies of educational transitions and teaching practices for students with intellectual disabilities (Andersson et al., 2021). Differing pedagogical approaches in special education settings shape the opportunities and expectations for students with ID, underscoring the importance of aligning teaching practices with broader goals of empowerment and inclusion (Hansson et al., 2024). Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) are essential tools in tailoring education to students' diverse needs, but they must be reoriented toward fostering independence and preparing students for varied adult roles (Peltomäki et al., 2021). Fostering self-determination empowers students to actively shape their learning and cultivate autonomy, while strengthening academic knowledge equips them to navigate societal and professional challenges with confidence. At the same time, functional skills, integrated with academic learning, anchor their development in practical, meaningful ways, fostering inclusion and a sense of belonging (Gustavsson et al., 2021).

Globally, curricula must evolve to address the diverse needs of students by prioritizing individualized and flexible approaches that transcend standardized models. Inclusive strategies, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and co-teaching, can support this evolution by creating adaptable learning environments (Lüddeckens, 2021). This evolution fosters inclusive, empowering educational environments that holistically support students' growth and prepare them for diverse life roles (Alnahdi et al., 2024; McKenzie, 2021). This vision aligns closely with Biesta's (2011) educational framework, integrating the dimensions

of qualification, socialization, and subjectification to meet the multifaceted aspirations of students with ID.

A greater emphasis on academic knowledge has prompted discussion on how social and practical skills can be integrated when teaching focuses on academic knowledge (Moljord, 2017). Östlund (2012) problematized the debate about a greater focus on academic knowledge and argued, for example, that it is problematic if education solely focuses on knowledge development without elements of care or if caring for students occurs without knowledge-developing intentions. In addition to special education teachers, paraprofessionals play a significant role in these educational settings. They are often involved in collaborative efforts alongside teachers, contributing to both teaching and care-oriented activities. However, a study focusing on Swedish conditions revealed that paraprofessionals typically lack pedagogical training and have limited opportunities to engage in lesson planning (Östlund et al., 2021). This underscores the need for targeted professional development initiatives to enhance their effectiveness in supporting students' learning and well-being. Competence development needs to be directed toward several professional groups working with students with intellectual disability, including special education teachers, teachers, and paraprofessionals.

Providing education to adapted to varying needs of students with intellectual disability is a challenge for teachers (Berry & Kim, 2008; Göransson et al., 2016). Generally, students with intellectual difficulty require more time to acquire basic skills (Göransson et al., 2016; Huffman et al., 2004). Meanwhile, studies indicate that it is challenging for teachers to meet the high demands outlined in educational documents and to assess students' level of knowledge (Andersson, 2020; Berry & Kim, 2008; Bierbaum et al., 2005). Continuous evaluation and guidance of teachers are needed to foster understanding and promote student learning (Baxter et al., 2002; Berry & Kim, 2008; Göransson et al., 2016). This aligns with the perspective on sustainable assessment, which highlights reflective practices to support lifelong learning and professional growth (Bagger & Östlund, 2021). Research emphasizes the importance of teachers' explicit instruction and continuous feedback, individual guidance, as well as teaching strategies applicable to various tasks, including those relevant to students' daily lives (Chung & Tam, 2005; Göransson et al., 2016; Kroesbergen & Van Luit, 2003; Milo et al., 2004; Strickland & Maccini, 2012).

Another crucial aspect is the need to provide students with active support in transitioning from a concrete approach to abstract approaches and developing their independence (Chung & Tam, 2005; Dessemontet et al., 2012). Miller et al. (2013) similarly discovered that guided inquiry methods enhance students learning. Furthermore, Klang et al. (2020) identifies high expectations of students' knowledge as beneficial and highlights the need for support in establishing and maintaining friendships for students with ID. One approach to supporting students socially is, for example, described in research that highlights work in smaller groups where students can communicate and articulate their learning, as well as gradually teaching cognitive strategies to solve more advanced tasks (Ainsworth et al., 2016). This approach not only encourages collaborative problem-solving but also helps students articulate their understanding and gradually develop advanced cognitive strategies (Wåger, 2021).

Bowman et al. (2019) and Clausen et al. (2021) argue that clear instructions can enhance the learning of students with ID, particularly in advanced mathematics. Bowman et al. (2019) advocate for anchored instruction, which links mathematical concepts to real-world problems and situations, while Clausen et al. (2021) propose modified schema-based instruction, focusing on breaking down mathematical problems. By employing both anchored instruction and modified schema-based instruction, students' mathematical development is likely to be promoted. Similarly, Alhwaiti (2022) emphasizes the importance of integrating teach-

ing into students' daily lives. Alhwaiti integrates the objectives of academic and functional mathematics, enabling students to acquire the practical mathematical skills necessary for their everyday lives. To conclude, while previous research highlights several instructional strategies, teachers may encounter challenges and need professional development in order to implement these strategies in practice.

This study is crucial in the current educational landscape for students with intellectual disability, as it addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by educators in meeting their students' diverse needs. By employing Biesta's (2011) three educational dimensions—qualification, socialization, and subjectification—as a comprehensive framework, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' professional development in education practices. Biesta's framework offers a nuanced perspective, amplifying the voices of teachers and their viewpoints on what constitutes effective education, particularly focusing on student security and relationship building. It encourages reflections beyond standardized assessments, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of education and the importance of integrating socialization and subjectification dimensions. In Sweden, students with intellectual disability are entitled to adapted education as per the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800, 2010), including specialized settings like CSSID and integrated mainstream education. However, recent curricular changes, such as an increased academic focus, present challenges for CSSID in meeting evolving expectations while ensuring meaningful instruction.

Teaching students with intellectual disability involves a complex educational mission, with an emphasis on academic knowledge acquisition alongside the development of social and practical skills. This necessitates continuous competence development among educational personnel to effectively address students' diverse needs. Educators encounter challenges in tailoring education for students with intellectual disability, requiring additional time and diverse teaching strategies. Collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals is crucial for addressing these challenges (Davidsson & Gustavsson, 2021). Ongoing support and professional development initiatives are essential for promoting student learning and overcoming obstacles in implementing adapted education. This study contributes to understanding teacher professional development in education practices for students with intellectual disability, providing insights into educators' perspectives and highlighting the importance of continuous competence development to meet the diverse needs of this student population.

The present article presents results from a large-scale research and development project aimed at contributing to municipalities' work with the multifaceted educational mission in Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, with a special focus on the didactic awareness of school personnel and the contextual conditions of schools.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the study is to gain knowledge about what CSSID teachers' and USSSID teachers' educational priorities and didactic choices are in the course of a professional development program, in which the teachers formulate priorities and work in iterative cycles to improve their instruction in prioritized areas.

- What goals do teachers in research circles consider relevant?
- What didactic situations do teachers emphasize?

2. Study Setting

The project is conducted in the context of a three-year professional development program directed by the Institute for Research and Development in School and supported by seven school municipalities. Emphasizing collaboration between researchers and teachers, the program aims to address specific needs and inquiries of participants, drawing upon ongoing research conducted within the program. At the start of the program, the teachers, school leaders, and paraprofessionals at each CSSID and USSSID form a professional development team and identify and prioritize areas of development in their instructional practices. The formulation of prioritized areas is created through iterative processes in which professionals observe and discuss their instructional practices. Based on the chosen prioritized area of work, the professionals formulate goals and didactic situations for their iterative instruction and evaluation cycles, conducted over a period of three years. The aim is to be able to evaluate and further develop their instructional practices. The professional development processes within the program are aimed at empowering professionals to change and develop their own practices, and the project is conducted in close collaboration with the involved municipalities at three levels. First, the project is continuously discussed in the steering committee, consisting of leaders of the education board in the seven municipalities. Second, the project is coordinated by central process leaders within each municipality, who further coordinate local process leaders at each school at the third level. Within this iterative professional development process, each professional team documents the goals, didactic situations to achieve these goals, and the progress their students make within the given didactic situations in diaries.

In the ongoing research and development program, we are implementing a hybrid model where meetings are facilitated by local process leaders and are specifically designed to focus on teaching practices and educators' didactic decisions, placing the didactic relationship at the forefront (Kansanen, 2003). However, these process leaders receive consistent support and guidance through regular meetings with the research group. Additionally, the research group actively engages with the development groups through recurrent development seminars and focus group interviews.

The practical work within each professional development circle will primarily revolve around discussions of how teachers' didactic choices are related to their students' learning. Documentation, predominantly in the form of video sequences from teaching practices, will serve as the primary basis for the work, complemented by student-produced material and pedagogical planning. Moreover, research-based texts will be thoroughly processed and employed for reflection, analysis, and development purposes. In essence, the activities carried out will yield valuable data to bridge the gap between research and practice, with a particular emphasis on student development and progression, thereby enriching educators' understanding of didactic decisions.

The primary researchers' focus will be on supporting educators in cultivating an awareness of didactic choices and refining their ability to openly test and evaluate these choices in alignment with students' developmental trajectories. Data collection will occur at both group and individual levels. At the group level, comprehensive diaries within research circles will be collected. It will be the responsibility of local process leaders to document these meetings, employing a structured template with headings such as goals for students' knowledge and skills linked to the problem statement, both in the short and long term, and didactic situations and limitations.

The data supporting this study are detailed in the Appendix A (Tables A1–A3). These tables provide a structured overview of the research, including the design of professional development activities, outcomes of didactic processes, and participant distribution. Each table is clearly labeled and accompanied by explanations of variables and relevant notes,

ensuring clarity and adherence to academic standards. This presentation facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the study's methodology and findings.

2.1. Research Ethics

The project was designed and conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements set by the Swedish Research Council for studies in the humanities and social sciences. Participants were informed about the purpose, design, and procedures of the study (and project); that all empirical data would be handled confidentially; that their participation was voluntary; and that measures were taken to reduce the risk of participant identification (Swedish Research Council, 2017). The primary measure to reduce the risk of participant identification was to remove all names of schools and municipalities during the transcription of data.

2.2. Analysis

The empirical material consists of 90 collected diaries containing goals of professional development, didactic situations, and professionals' ideas of how their students' progress could be made visible. Analysis of the contents of the diaries was performed using the method of qualitative content analysis, where the manifest content was the focus (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach aligns with the framework proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), emphasizing the interpretation of discernible and evident features in the text to identify prevailing patterns and themes.

Manifest content analysis enables the extraction of visible and explicit content from empirical material, facilitating subjective interpretations to capture the essence of the text and identify prevailing patterns and themes, in line with the framework proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). This analytical approach centers on interpreting evident and discernible elements within the text, guiding our analysis process (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Initially, we identified codes contained in the text that represented key concepts or topics. These codes were then aggregated and synthesized, resulting in the establishment of broad categories that allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the data. A table summarizing primary and secondary codes is included for clarity and can be found in the Appendix A (Table A4), providing an organized overview of the categories used in the analysis. This methodical methodology allowed us to uncover relevant patterns and themes embedded in the diaries, offering insights into the viewpoints and approaches used by professionals on their professional development journeys. The analysis was conducted inductively, enabling patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data. This approach acknowledges the active role of the researcher in interpreting and selecting themes, emphasizing that the process does not aim for a single or objective outcome. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommendations, we refrained from inter-rater reliability estimates, as such measures that imply a singular interpretation of the data, contrary to the goals of qualitative analysis.

The coding process was primarily handled by one researcher, who took the main responsibility for analyzing the material. However, the broader research group engaged collaboratively in iterative discussions to refine the coding and identify themes. This iterative feedback process and collaboration with the broader team ensured a multidimensional interpretation of the data, enriching the analysis with diverse perspectives. This collaborative effort ensured that multiple perspectives were considered, adding depth to the analysis and enhancing its validity.

The methodical methodology allowed us to uncover relevant patterns and themes embedded in the diaries, offering insights into the viewpoints and approaches used by

professionals on their professional development journeys. The inductive and iterative nature of the analysis process highlights the nuanced understanding gained, ensuring the findings are grounded in the empirical material while accommodating the complexity of the data.

3. Results

The results of this study are organized into two themes: (1) Teachers' long- and short-term goals for students' knowledge and skills and (2) didactic situations and boundaries. The first theme addresses teachers' efforts to create learning environments that foster students' independence through supportive teaching in both the short and long term. The second theme focuses on teachers' strategies to provide beneficial didactic situations and establish clear boundaries. Each thematic aspect is illustrated with systematically coded quotations. Quotations from the Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities are labeled as CSSID, and those from the Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities are marked as USSSID.

3.1. Teachers Long- and Short-Term Goals for Students' Knowledge and Skills

This theme comprises several central areas, all of which reveal teachers' planned goals for students' knowledge and skills, both short and long term, in teaching.

3.1.1. Enhancing Interpersonal Relationships and Communication Competencies

The first central area concerns how teachers, in the long and short term, aim to support students in establishing connections with other students or school staff and gaining confidence in their ability to communicate and collaborate with others. A short-term goal highlighted that related to the curriculum's objective was visible in the following except: "Students should independently initiate communication with another" (USSSID). Longer-term goals focus on supporting students in developing their independence and based on their abilities, communicating and interacting with others. This is clearly illustrated in the following quotation: "That students feel increased confidence in taking greater responsibility for their communication" (USSSID).

3.1.2. Fostering Expression of Desires and Opinions

The second central area teachers emphasize as both long- and short-term goals is supporting students' ability to communicate their desires, preferences, and opinions. A short-term goal highlighted is the following: "The student is expected to initiate communication and also communicate about societal issues and student-related topics from their perspective, as well as communicate their desires and wishes" (USSSID). Longer-term goals chosen by teachers focus on supporting students in making sustainable choices independently, using alternative communication to support communication in selected subjects. A school writes the following: "In the long term, students will develop advanced communication skills using Widget symbols and other digital resources. These skills will be integrated into their daily lives and used in various contexts, enhancing their independence and inclusion" (CSSID).

3.1.3. Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition and Comprehension

The third central area deemed important to support students with, both in the long and short term, is developing students' vocabulary understanding in various subjects through listening. A short-term goal is the following: "The goal is to make students' ability to recognize the content of a narrative text visible" (CSSID). Longer-term goals involve supporting students in developing the ability to use words and concepts in speech and writing. An illus-

tration of this can be found in the following statement: "To increase students' independence in their knowledge acquisition and ability to reflect on their development" (USSSID).

3.1.4. Fostering Autonomy and Active Participation

The fourth central area concerns teachers' efforts to support students in increasing their autonomy, actively participating during the school day, and taking their initiative. A short-term goal is exemplified by the following assertion: "Students should feel capable of influencing their situation by making their own choices" (CSSID). Longer-term goals include increasing students' independence and participation in knowledge acquisition and asking questions indicating awareness of their knowledge development. This is echoed by the following statemen: "We want to increase students' participation and awareness of their learning and highlight their knowledge development. We wish for students, by asking questions such as what the next step is and what I need to reach it, to become independent in their learning" (USSSID).

3.1.5. Enhancing Communication Tool Utilization for Student Engagement

The fifth and final area that teachers want to work on to support students is the importance of using communication tools. By developing strategies for tools, students can become more communicatively active, and the tool can become an important support function during the school day. A short-term goal is the following: "Students are expected to develop basic skills in using communication tools such as Widget symbols and symbols to express thoughts, feelings, and needs" (CSSID). A long-term goal is to develop more individualized instructions by adapting the learning environment and offering communication aids to meet students' individual needs. Another long-term goal is to highlight students' progression in different subject areas: "How can we individualize and work with progression based on an area in social studies/everyday activities? as part of building up a knowledge bank" (USSSID).

In summary, short-term goals in all templates largely focus on students' communication abilities, adapted learning environments, use of alternative communication, support of goal achievement, and active participation in teaching as important areas. The theme that emerges from these quotes mainly revolves around the purpose and goals of education, with a focus on promoting students' independence, communication skills, and ability to actively participate in society.

3.2. Didactic Situations and Boundaries

This theme comprises various ways to visualize the development of their students concerning didactic situations and boundaries.

3.2.1. Fostering Autonomy and Choice Through Teacher-Led Activities

The first central area revolves around teachers creating activities that support autonomy and choice. In didactic situations, teachers will create conditions for students to make their own choices and initiate communication, both in familiar situations and new contexts. This is exemplified by the following quotation: "We aim, both in the short and long term, to develop the student's own choice, based on their own will, and initially give the student two choices in situations we control, then expand the choices. The student should initially initiate communication in familiar situations such as mealtime, pedagogical dog, and esthetic activities" (USSSID).

3.2.2. Enhancing Communication Skills Through Digital Tools and Communication Maps

The second central area concerns teachers planning to support students' ability to use communication maps and digital communication tools. Both students and teachers

work on learning different communication tools such as Widget symbols, alternative and augmentative communication, and signs as alternative communication to support students' communication and autonomy. The description is reflected in the following quote: "Work on computer skills. The students will have lessons in alternative and augmentative communication. The student will help search for information for theme work and outings on their iPad. Home economics with students from another school" (USSSID).

3.2.3. Tailoring Didactic Situations to Individual Student Needs

The third central area focuses on teachers creating didactic situations based on students' individual needs. Individual communication tools and strategies should be designed for each student based on their needs and abilities. The description aligns with the following quote: "By using this structured approach and with regular evaluation, you will have a clear framework to follow and support students' development using Widget symbols throughout the term. It will allow you to adapt and adjust to each student's progress and needs" (CSSID).

3.2.4. Fostering Collaboration and Group Work Across Subject

In the fourth central area, didactic situations are planned through collaboration and group work, working across subjects through thematic work. Theme work and subject areas will be used to develop collaboration skills through various themes, collaborative exercises, and peer feedback. The description correlates with the following quotation: "The student needs teaching outside her room, in common areas. The student participates in a context where communication with peers takes place. Encourage group lessons and thematic work, outings" (USSSID).

3.2.5. Implementing Structured Teaching and Recurring Work Sessions

The fifth central area is about supporting students through structured teaching with recurring work sessions. Regular feedback and collective reflections should be implemented to support students' development towards independence. The description aligns with the following quotation: "By creating structure. Recurring work sessions. Clear instructions with visual aids. By focusing only on three different materials. Plastic, metal, paper. By clearly and systematically introducing the concepts in other contexts" (CSSID).

3.2.6. Observation and Documentation of Student Learning Processes

The seventh area teachers plan to support students is observing and documenting students' learning processes. This way, teachers can gain insights and make adjustments in their teaching. The description aligns with the following quotation: "Observe a student during an individual task during school hours in the classroom. Observations in each other's classrooms, filming or recording audio" (CSSID).

In summary, there is a clear endeavor to create an inclusive and adaptable learning environment where each student is allowed to develop their communication, independence, and learning in the best possible way. Through a combination of different methods, tools, and activities, teaching aims to promote students' well-being and progress in various areas.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This manuscript adds to the debate surrounding education for students with ID, actualizing what the focus of education should be in the context of a continuously changing educational landscape (Moljord, 2017; Shurr & Bouck, 2013). A key challenge is managing pedagogical transitions, which require clear structures and collaboration across school levels (Andersson et al., 2021). Teachers and schools face challenges in providing accessible education that meets students' individual needs and promotes their learning

(Berry & Kim, 2008; Göransson et al., 2016). Students with ID require more time to learn and support to acquire basic skills (Andersson, 2020; Huffman et al., 2004), posing a challenge for teachers to maintain and cater to these needs within the constraints of existing teaching time and curriculum (Baxter et al., 2002; Strickland & Maccini, 2012).

4.1. Consideration of Relevant Goals

This article sheds light on the teacher priorities and didactic choices in educational settings for students with intellectual disability. The findings in this study suggest that teachers actively work to achieve the goals outlined in educational documents by clarifying the content through both short- and long-term goals. The goals teachers consider relevant are connected to supporting students in establishing connections, gaining confidence in communication and collaboration, expressing desires and opinions, developing vocabulary understanding, increasing autonomy and participation, and utilizing communication tools effectively Teachers' focus on relational competence underscores the importance of trust and supportive teacher–student relationships in fostering these outcomes (Platin Ewe, 2021). Moreover, fostering students' self-expression reflects efforts to build inclusive environments that promote self-determination and agency, emphasizing the ethical dimensions of education (Klefbeck, 2021). The results of this study indicate that teachers within the research and development program consciously prioritize goals connected to students' communication, autonomy, and development (Hansson et al., 2024).

4.2. Didactic Situations Emphasized by Teachers

Didactic situations are created to promote the development of students' communicative abilities in various educational contexts. This aligns with research emphasizing inclusive education strategies such as co-teaching and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Lüddeckens, 2021). Promoting autonomy through structured choices and communication tools is similarly highlighted in work on Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), where individualized strategies enable active learning (Eriksson, 2021). Additionally, teachers' focus on collaborative exercises and thematic work reflects the principles of cooperative learning, enhancing peer interaction and skill development (Wåger, 2021). These insights prepare students for future challenges in the workforce, education, and society (Biesta, 2011). The observation and documentation of student learning processes enable teachers to gain valuable insights and make informed adjustments to their teaching practices. By actively monitoring students' progress and documenting their learning journey, teachers can tailor interventions to meet individual needs effectively.

Another crucial aspect is the need to provide students with active support in transitioning from concrete to abstract approaches and developing their independence (Chung & Tam, 2005; Dessemontet et al., 2012). This transition is crucial for students to navigate successfully in school and society (Freeman & Alkin, 2000). By creating inclusive and supportive learning environments and using various educational tools and individual adaptations, teachers can promote students' learning and quality of life (Göransson et al., 2016). According to Biesta (2011), the qualification dimension is a central aspect aimed at equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the workforce, education, and society at large. At the same time, Biesta emphasizes the importance of not solely focusing on this dimension in education but also considering the socialization and subjectification dimensions.

Similarly to Biesta, professionals in this study strive to both qualify students by imparting formal knowledge and skills and, above all, to promote students' conditions for socialization and self-determination through adapted learning situations and activities (Hansson et al., 2024; Peltomäki et al., 2021). By integrating these three dimensions into

education, students' development at different levels can be promoted, which is highlighted in the study as a central starting point. A need to tailor didactic situations to each student's individual needs and abilities emerges (Browder et al., 2003). By designing individualized communication tools and strategies, teachers strive to create an inclusive learning environment that promotes each student's development and well-being. Furthermore, the promotion of collaboration and group work across subjects underscores the importance of interdisciplinary learning and peer interaction. Through thematic work and collaborative exercises, students are provided with opportunities to develop collaboration skills while engaging in meaningful learning experiences (Gustavsson et al., 2021). Research emphasizes the importance of teachers' explicit instruction and continuous feedback, individual guidance, as well as teaching strategies applicable to various tasks, including those relevant to students' daily lives (Alhwaiti, 2022). Studies conducted by Chung and Tam (2005); Göransson et al. (2016); Kroesbergen and Van Luit (2003); and Strickland and Maccini (2012) highlight the significance of these instructional approaches in supporting students with intellectual disabilities. By integrating various didactic strategies and tools, they strive to create an inclusive and adaptable learning environment where each student can flourish and reach their full potential.

4.3. Strategies for Making Student Progress Visible

The project's development and research efforts show the need for context-adapted methods to pragmatically promote school development and teachers' professional work. By initially mapping and describing needs and conditions at different levels (school, group, and individual levels), the professional development groups have demonstrated an awareness of the complexity of educational considerations for students with ID and the importance of adapted interventions (cf. Chan, 2011). Mapping needs at different levels—school, group, and individual—enables teachers to address the complexities of educating students with ID and implement tailored interventions, bridging the gap between research and practice (Bagger & Östlund, 2021). Sustainable assessment is emphasized as both a tool for evaluating progress and fostering lifelong learning. Additionally, collaboration between teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and other stakeholders is crucial for addressing diverse student needs, aligning with effective models of teamwork and professional synergy (Davidsson & Gustavsson, 2021). By customizing didactic situations and communication strategies, teachers create inclusive environments that support students' development and well-being. Moreover, the customization of didactic situations to individual student needs reflects a personalized approach towards education (Hansson et al., 2024). By designing communication tools and strategies adapted to each student's abilities, teachers strive to create an inclusive learning environment that fosters growth and development (Gustavsson et al., 2021; McKenzie, 2021).

By using the method of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), patterns and themes have been identified in the empirical material, contributing to a deeper understanding of teaching practice. Participant-based research has the potential to promote shared knowledge production between researchers and practitioners and among school staff. By having professionals actively involved in the research process, there are conditions to formulate and explore relevant questions to their practice, increasing engagement and improving the project's anchoring in the school's knowledge-centered mission.

The findings presented in this study shed light on the nuanced considerations, strategic planning, and didactic choices undertaken by teachers to support students' progress toward educational goals. Through an exploration of various central areas, it becomes evident that teachers prioritize fostering students' communication abilities, autonomy, and active participation in learning. However, studies also indicate that teachers face

challenges in meeting the high demands outlined in educational documents and assessing students' level of knowledge (Andersson, 2020; Berry & Kim, 2008; Bierbaum et al., 2005). Despite these challenges, teachers' strategic planning and emphasis on fostering essential skills such as communication and autonomy reflect a proactive approach to addressing the diverse needs of students (Peltomäki et al., 2021). Short-term goals predominantly focus on immediate improvements in communication skills, the adaptation of learning environments, and the utilization of assistive communication tools. The examination of didactic situations and boundaries within the educational context underscores the intricate strategies employed by teachers to facilitate students' development. The various central areas explored in this study illuminate a concerted effort to foster autonomy, enhance communication skills, tailor didactic situations to individual needs, promote collaboration, implement structured teaching, and document student learning processes. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of teachers' explicit instruction and continuous feedback, individual guidance, as well as teaching strategies applicable to various tasks, including those relevant to students' daily lives (Chung & Tam, 2005; Göransson et al., 2016; Kroesbergen & Van Luit, 2003; Milo et al., 2004; Strickland & Maccini, 2012). Therefore, the strategic planning and implementation of short-term goals by teachers are crucial in aligning with broader research findings and effectively supporting students' diverse learning needs. Additionally, integrating cognitive strategies gradually into instruction reflects a nuanced approach to supporting students in tackling more advanced tasks, as advocated in prior research (Bowman et al., 2019; Clausen et al., 2021; Hord & Xin, 2015). These short-term objectives are strategically aligned with long-term goals aimed at cultivating students' independence, enhancing their communication proficiency, and fostering their inclusion within society.

The emphasis placed by teachers on students' ability to establish connections, express desires and opinions, and develop vocabulary understanding underscores a holistic approach toward education. Furthermore, the integration of alternative communication and individualized instruction demonstrates a commitment to catering to the diverse needs of students, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. However, studies suggest that teachers may face challenges in meeting the demands outlined in educational documents and accurately assessing students' knowledge levels (Andersson, 2020; Berry & Kim, 2008; Bierbaum et al., 2005), highlighting the complexity of effectively catering to the varied learning needs within the classroom. Integration of digital tools and communication maps emerges as a crucial aspect of enhancing students' communication skills. Through collaborative efforts between students and teachers, the utilization of alternative and augmentative communication methods is prioritized to accommodate diverse needs and promote autonomy in communication.

While this study provides valuable insights into the strategies and didactic approaches employed by teachers in educational settings for students with intellectual disabilities, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a specific context and group of teachers participating in a research and development program, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Second, the reliance on qualitative methods, while offering in-depth understanding, may not capture the full spectrum of teaching practices and challenges. Third, the study does not address long-term outcomes for students, which could provide further insights into the effectiveness of the strategies described. By acknowledging these limitations, important areas for future research emerge, which could contribute to strengthening and expanding the knowledge of didactic approaches for students with intellectual disabilities.

4.4. Conclusions

By synthesizing the previously discussed didactic situations and strategies, we can draw several conclusions and identify implications for educational practice and professional development for teachers within the research and development program. It is evident that teachers prioritize promoting students' autonomy and choice by creating didactic situations that enable choice-making and initiate communication. By offering structured choices and supporting students' communication in various contexts, teachers aim to foster students' independence and confidence. Moving forward, continued collaboration and innovation in educational practices are imperative to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students. By delineating short- and long-term goals centered on communication, autonomy, and utilization of resources, teachers strive to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment conducive to students' holistic progress. The importance of enhancing students' communication skills through digital tools and communication maps is emphasized. By integrating these tools into instruction and collaborating with students, teachers work to develop alternative and augmentative communication methods to support students' learning and autonomy. Additionally, the implementation of structured teaching and recurring work sessions underscores a systematic approach towards supporting students' learning and development. By providing clear instructions and focusing on specific materials, teachers facilitate learning and promote independence through structured routines. Moving forward, continued research and collaboration are essential to further refine and implement effective strategies that promote student success and well-being in educational settings for students with intellectual disabilities.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (protocol code 2024-00437-01). The project involved the analysis of diaries written by teacher teams, which do not include any ethically problematic data.

Informed Consent Statement: At the outset of the project, participants were informed that the diaries they created as part of their professional development work would be used for research and analysis purposes. This information was communicated during the initial phases of the project, and participants were given the opportunity to voluntarily submit their diaries. By doing so, participants provided their informed consent for the data to be used in the study. All diaries were handled with strict confidentiality, ensuring anonymity and protecting participant privacy, as no personal identifiers were included in the research material. This approach aligns with ethical guidelines and the principle of informed consent.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants. Although the data has been handled in a manner that adheres to ethical standards and does not pose ethical concerns, sharing the data publicly could risk breaching participant privacy and anonymity. This is in accordance with the ethical approval granted by the Ethical Review Authority. For further information about the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of participants and activities in CSSID and USSSID by category, 2023.

	CSSID	USSSID	Both CSSID	Total
Participants	86	79		165
Development groups	17	10		27
Diaries	48	42		90
Municipalities	4	3	2	71

Explanations: The table provides an overview of participation and activities across the Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (CSSID) and Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (USSSID), as well as combined contributions in 2023. **Participants:** The total number of individuals involved in CSSID and USSSID activities, broken down by school type and overall total. **Development Groups:** The number of groups formed to focus on educational development within CSSID, USSSID, and combined contexts. **Diaries:** The number of diaries documenting activities and reflections within CSSID and USSSID settings. **Municipalities:** The total number of municipalities involved in CSSID, USSSID, and those contributing to both school types.

Table A2. Diaries and participant distribution by municipality, 2023.

Municipality	Diaries	Participants
STH (USSSID)	22	46
STH (CSSUD	16	40
KLP (CSSID)	9	6
BJV (CSSID)	6	2
ASP (CSSID)	2	6
ULR (CSSID)	9	16
VST (USSSID)	12	27
KRS (USSSID)	6	6
KRS (CSSID)	12	10 [1]

[1] Explanation: Table A3 provides an overview of the distribution of diaries and participants by municipality in 2023, categorized by the educational context: Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (CSSID) and Upper Secondary School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (USSSID). **Diaries:** Indicates the number of reflective or observational entries collected in each municipality. **Participants:** Shows the number of individuals actively contributing to the study in those respective locations.

Table A3. Overview of educational statistics for students with intellectual disabilities by municipality, 2022/2023.

Municipality	Number of Students with ID Enrolled in Education	Qualified Teachers (%)	Teacher-to-Student Ratio (No)
STH (USSSID)	853	Ph; 76.6 Sp; 17.3	278.7
STH (CSSID)	2677	Ph 78.8 Sp; 21.7	645.4
KLP (CSSID)	54	Ph; 96.5 Sp; 41.7	9.6
BJV (CSSID)	40	Ph: 82.6 Sp; 37.6	15.3
AST (CSSID)	24	Ph; 98.4 Sp; 44.9	6.7
ULR (CSSID)	50	Ph; 99.1 Sp; 9.9	17.6
VST (USSSID)	154	Ph; 75.4 Sp; 24.7	N/A

Table A3. *Cont.*

Municipality	Number of Students with ID Enrolled in Education	Qualified Teachers (%)	Teacher-to-Student Ratio (No)
KRS (USSSID)	72	Ph; 90.3 Sp, 67.6	N/A
KRS (CSSID)	145	Ph; 90.5 Sp; 31.5	40 [1]

[1] Explanations: Number of students with ID: Total number of students with intellectual disabilities in the municipality and school (USSSID or CSSID) in 2022/2023. Qualified Teachers (%): Percentage of qualified teachers, divided into special education teachers (Sp) and subject teachers (Ph). Teacher-to-student ratio: Number of teachers per student in the specific municipality or program. N/A, data is not available.

Table A4. Overview of primary themes, secondary codes, and examples.

Primary Theme	Secondary Codes	Description/Example
3.1 Teachers long- and short-term goals for students' knowledge and skills	3.1.1. Enhancing interpersonal relationships and communication competencies 3.1.2. Fostering expression of desires and opinions 3.1.3. Enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension 3.1.4. Fostering autonomy and active participation 3.1.5. Enhancing communication tool utilization	Teachers' goals focus on fostering independence, communication skills, and active participation. For example: "Students should independently initiate communication with another." (USSSID)
3.2 Didactic situations and boundaries	3.2.1. Fostering autonomy and choice through teacher-led activities 3.2.2. Enhancing communication skills through digital tools and communication maps 3.2.3. Tailoring didactic situations to individual student needs 3.2.4. Fostering collaboration and group work across subjects 3.2.5. Implementing structured teaching and recurring work sessions 3.2.6. Observation and documentation of student learning processes	Teachers emphasize creating adaptable learning environments, using digital tools, and encouraging collaborative work. For example: "Recurring work sessions with visual aids to support independence." (CSSID) [1]

[1] Explanation: Primary theme: Represents overarching themes based on the main headings in the results, such as "Teachers' long- and short-term goals.". Secondary codes: Specific areas identified within each theme, such as "Fostering autonomy and choice through teacher-led activities." Description/Example: A brief summary of what each secondary code entails, accompanied by an example from the data to illustrate the findings.

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