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Learning disability and work inclusion: on the experiences, aspirations and empowerment of sheltered employment workers in Norway

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ABSTRACT

This inclusive research inspired study explored the experiences of people with learning disabilities working in a Norwegian sheltered employment company. The study aimed at developing knowledge on the working experiences of people with learning disabilities and the impact of their participation in the study. We employed focus groups, supplemented by informal discussions to generate data for the study. Together with the employees and employers, we established two three-member focus groups. The participants, both males and females, discussed their work experiences and the empowering consequences of participating in the research. The data indicated that the employees had desires to work fully in ordinary companies, assuming socially valued roles. The participants experienced a combination of work in ordinary and sheltered employment companies as less stressful and satisfying. The adopted inclusive research strategy empowered our research partners to reflect on their experiences and made efforts to meet their working life dreams.

KEYWORDS

Learning disability; work; inclusion; experiences; dreams; aspirations

Points of interest

- Participation in work-life is a central policy for all Norwegian citizens, including people with learning disabilities.
- This article presents and discusses the personal experiences of people with learning disabilities whose desire it is to work and contribute their quota to the Norwegian society.
- The research participants indicated that many people with learning disabilities would like to be a part of ordinary working life, but face barriers to attaining their goals.
- A combination of sheltered and ordinary work seems to work well for research participants with learning disabilities.

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- Participation in this inclusive research seemed to empower people with learning disabilities and enabled them to realize their dreams and aspiration regarding work-life.

Introduction

The inclusion of people with disabilities in working life has been and continues to be a central socio-political goal in many countries (Marin, Prins, and Queisser 2004; Kassah 2008; Tøssebro 2010; Ellingsen 2011; Reinertsen 2012; Frøyland, Schafft and Thorkildssen 2014). In Norway, the main goal is to make everyone who is capable a part of working life, and not dependent on social security. There is, therefore, the need for innovative research to guide the formulation and implementation of the policy of work participation for all who are willing and capable of participating in working life. This inclusive research inspired article seeks to explore and promote the understanding of the experiences of research participants with learning disabilities who currently work both in a sheltered employment company and an ordinary work setting in Norway. An important question to answer is; what are the work-life experiences of people with learning disabilities, and how can participation in research processes contribute to the realisation of their working life dreams? We expect that the active participation of people with learning disabilities in some of the research processes may enhance their chances of realising their working life dreams. The goal of the study is to empower people with learning disabilities and contribute to making their voices the basis for the development of strategies geared towards working life inclusion in Norway.

One can trace the present Norwegian policy on work inclusion to the report of the 1947 Torp Committee, which was established to evaluate the possibility of partial work inclusion for injured war veterans after the second world war (NOU. 2012, 6). The EU Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) which among others called for the adaptation of workplace for people with disabilities (Kuznetsova and Bento 2018), were sources of inspiration for policies on workplace inclusion for people with disabilities in Norway. In 2001, the Inclusive Working Life Agreement (IA Agreement) came into effect to increase employers' responsibilities for vulnerable groups (Dahl and Lorentzen 2017; Madal and Ose 2015). Norway adopted the Anti-Discrimination and Accessibility Act (ADAA) in 2009 and ratified it in 2013 to ensure non-discrimination of people with disabilities. The 2012 Report of the Committee for Work Strategies further promoted the policy of inclusive working life for people with disabilities (NOU. 2012, 6). According to the report, it is important both for society and the individual with reduced work

capacity to have the opportunity to engage in paid work. For the Committee members, 'it is a problem that many are outside work life ...' The committee had it as one of its mandates to consider the place of sheltered work and suggest ways of improving the sheltered work initiative with the goal of making it a transition point to ordinary working life for people with reduced work capacity.

There are different types of sheltered employment strategies; permanently adapted employment strategies in sheltered companies, permanently adapted employment strategies in ordinary companies and permanent wage subsidies (PROBA 2016). Permanently adapted employment strategies come under the employment laws on the work environment. The participants of permanent adapted employment receive work contracts specifying their conditions of work under the employment regulations. People with learning disabilities who partake in permanent adapted employment do not receive only disability pension but also a token amount per hour. Söderström and Tøssebro (2011), pointed out that people normally qualify for disability pension if one's earning capacity reduces by half, but people with learning disabilities almost automatically assume disability pension status. Workers in permanent adapted employment in sheltered companies may receive up to 6 months' permission to try their skills in ordinary workplaces. One expects that the participants undergo regular evaluation to ascertain whether to transfer them to other work-related strategies, education or supported to participate in ordinary employment.

Even though the workforce is one of the most important resources in Norway (Meld. St. 33 (2015–2016) (2016) the working capacities of people with learning disabilities remain an unexplored resource (Hvinden and Harvorsen 2003). A PROBA report (2016) pointed out that there is a potential for increased work participation for people with learning disabilities in sheltered and ordinary companies. According to the report since people with learning disabilities persistently have low productivity compared to people without learning disabilities in the field of work, we should expect that most people with learning disabilities would need support to participate in work life (PROBA 2016). Permanent adapted employment in sheltered companies is one such state support strategy that facilitates work inclusion for many people with learning disabilities who presently or are expecting a disability pension and needs special adaptation and guidance.

Learning disability is one of the concepts that describe people with intellectual and developmental difficulties (Parameter 2011). The Norwegian Directorate of Health (Helsedirektoratet) (2015) adopted the WHO's definition of learning disability as a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind. A person with a learning disability has either inherited or acquired a condition with a significant impairment of intellectual, adaptive and social

functioning. One with the learning disability is in a state of reduced thinking, attention, memory, learning and understanding of language (Frøyland, Schafft and Thorkildssen 2014). The Norwegian Directorate of Health (2015) adds that people with learning disabilities may or may not acquire psychological and somatic disorders. For Tøssebro and Lundebj (2002), a consequence of learning disability is that people with the condition have problems understanding abstract concepts. In Norway, many people with learning disabilities have the desire to be a part of work activities, but only 25% of those in the employment age have work (NOU. 2016, 17). Most of them, according to the report, are engaged in employment-related initiatives (NOU. 2016, 17). The report also stated that only 10% of people with learning disabilities engage in work activities in ordinary companies. Also, only a few people with learning difficulties participate in ordinary companies without support. Earlier research also indicated that about 41% of people with learning disabilities had work-related day activities, most of them in permanent adapted sheltered employment companies (Reinertsen 2012). According to Reinertsen (2012), under 48% of people with learning disabilities in Norway participate in daycare activities provided by the local community. Reinertsen (2012) pointed out that 12% do not participate in any form of daycare activities. Söderström and Tøssebro (2011) show that there is a decrease in the number of adults with learning disabilities participating in sheltered employment companies from 30% in 2001 to 13% in 2010. The research indicates that due to the reduction in labour market initiatives, the Norwegian municipalities have changed the services to people with learning disabilities from productivity to activities in daycare centres or no activity (Söderström and Tøssebro 2011). In other words, while the work-focused activities reduce, there is an increase in care-oriented activities (Kittelsaa and Tøssebro 2013). For Ellingsen (2011), the opening up of sheltered employment companies to other groups of people with disabilities may account for the reduction in the enrolment of people with learning disabilities in sheltered work settings.

There is an increasing demand for the inclusion of people with learning disabilities in research (Bigby and Frawley 2015). Inclusive research is the umbrella concept that embraces participatory, action and emancipatory research practices (Nind 2017). According to Nind (2017), inclusive research epitomises the redirection of research from research on people, to research with them. The approach seeks to reflect the principle that research participants play major roles in all research processes (Bigby and Frawley 2015). According to Walmsley (2001), in inclusive research, the participants with learning disabilities are expected to be 'more than just subjects or respondents', not only groups about whom others write. Inclusive research is about their lived experience, respect for them and valuing of different ways of

knowing (Nind 2017). For Richardson (1997), Stalker (1998) and Walmsley (2001, 2004), people with learning disabilities have the right to be consulted and involved in all issues concerning them.

In this study, we adopted the view of Walmsley (2004) that inclusion takes different forms, and there is no one approach. Our research participants with learning disabilities have the role of research partners, even though in a more limited sense. We involved our partners mostly in activities they mastered and are comfortable doing. Our partners played active roles in research processes, including data generation and presentation of the findings at conferences, meetings with their employers to influence change processes in the company. Following Bigby and Frawley (2015), we made sure that the research has positive outcomes for them.

Methods

We chose a qualitative approach in this study which sought to throw light on the experiences and aspirations of people with learning disabilities in a sheltered employment company that provides for attachment opportunities in an ordinary company in Norway. The chosen approach was to make it possible for the researchers to capture multiple social realities connected to work-life (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Liamputong 2013). The participants of this study, as in other studies grounded on inclusive research principles, had rich knowledge on the realities of work-life and could convey their knowledge as evidence in research (Higginbottom et al. 2006). The choice of qualitative approach was also because of the desire to capture, interpret and create a deeper understanding of the varied work experiences and aspirations of the informants.

We adopted focus groups method to generate information for this study. According to Bryman (2016, 500), a focus group involves more than one person, usually at least four informants, to acquire a deeper understanding of a specific theme. In this article, we were interested in understanding the aspirations and work-life experiences of people with learning disabilities. We were also interested in capturing the impact that participation in research had on our research partners. Our informants with learning disabilities participated actively in parts of the research processes and made their voices heard. An emphasis on making the voices of the research participants with learning disabilities heard derives from the principle of inclusive research. Inclusive research principles empower people with learning disabilities to contribute their knowledge, guidance and participation in the dissemination of findings with co-researchers (Stalker 1998; Rodgers 1999). Informal discussions supplemented the focus group method for data generation. We

included informal discussions to help us capture important data that came to the fore in interactions between and after the focus group meetings.

The field

The targeted work inclusion public enterprise where we recruited our partners for the research is a sheltered employment company with the fictive name AKO AS. A sheltered employment company is one that has the structures in place to facilitate work inclusion for people with reduced work capacity. The company offers work assessment and work trial opportunities for people with impairments in a private company with a fictive name R100. AKO AS was established in 1964 mainly for people with disabilities and people with alcohol and psychiatric problems. AKO AS has three departments with a total of 180 workers. Out of the 180 employees, 80 of them are workers with reduced work capacity. The employees of AKO AS work in different departments. These include the transport, fruit packing, and cafeteria and firewood production departments. AKO AS was our natural choice for study due to many reasons. In the first place, the company collaborates with our University in terms of teaching and research. The first author cooperates with some of our research partners in joint teaching activities for our students. Also, due to the short physical distance between the two institutions, it was easier to have frequent face to face meetings with our research partners. The closeness of the company to the University, therefore, may have helped in sustaining the network relations necessary to promote research collaboration, influence changes in the organisation and to enable AKO AS employees to meet their work-related dreams and aspirations.

Acquiring ethical clearance and research consent

We applied for and acquired ethical clearance for our study from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) before proceeding to obtain oral and written informed consent from the research participants. The consent to participate in the research was granted after we explained the research contents, the main goals and roles to our research partners. One informant who did not have the opportunity to provide her written consent letter at the same time as the others did so immediately before the first focus group meeting. Even though our research partners willingly endorsed the letter of consent, it may have been difficult for them to turn down the request to participate in the study because the first author had earlier interacted closely with the company leaders and some of the participants. On the other hand, it is in place to note that the relations of trust that existed and developed

between the first author and our research partners over time made it easier for our partners to choose to be a part of the study.

Recruitment of research partners

The effort to recruit partners for the study started with the arrangement of four meetings with employers and employees of AKO AS. The first meeting was between the first author and the leaders of AKO AS. The meeting was to discuss views on the recruitment process. Secondly, the author met with one research participant who joined the first author to give a lecture on 'Working life as a person with a learning disability' at our university. The first author seized the opportunity to ask the research participant whether he would like to take part in the study. The participant accepted the invitation, but the first author followed up with a letter and telephone calls to be sure that the informant understood her request. The third meeting took place at a Café on campus between the first author and some AKO AS employees to seek their opinion on participation. Fourthly, the first author again met the leaders and employees to discuss the selection of the research partners. At this meeting, the first author made clearer the criteria for the recruitment and the required number of research partners to the meeting participants. Apart from being an employee of AKO AS and having had previous contact with the first author, the ability to express oneself was an important criterion to be eligible to participate in the study. The role of the leaders of ASKO AS was important in the selection of the research participants. While the participation of the leaders in the selection process might have had a gatekeeping effect, it is also true that the leaders interact with the workers daily and have a fair understanding of the employees who could freely express themselves regarding the study theme.

In all, six research participants between the ages of 28 to 45 years took part in the study. We will refer to our research participants using the following fictive names, Olav, Inger, Silje, Bjorn, Gro and Jan. Our research participants have a moderate degree of learning disability, and they have all completed their senior high school education. Except one, five of the informants graduated from the cookery and service departments of different senior high schools in town. The sixth research partner applied for a transfer from the cookery and service departments to the mechanical department. Three of the participants (Olav, Jan & Bjorn) are attached to R100 on work trial between two to three days a week. At AKO AS, our research partners work in the transport, fruit packing, firewood production and cafeteria departments.

The recruitment process was not without a challenge. After the first focus group session, other co-workers of our research partners expressed the

desire to participate in the study. We were, however, unable to meet the request as we felt that could affect the flow of activities in the groups. Also, the employees were informed about the number of partners we needed for the study due to time challenges. While the rejection of the requests of some of the potential research partners may have affected the inclusive and empowering agenda of the study, the ability of the first author to explain and win respect and trust of those rejected helped keep the focus on the study.

Establishing and conducting the focus groups

We established two focus groups based on the discussions we had with our partners. Each group comprised of three participants of both sexes. We conducted the focus groups meetings in localities outside the workplaces of our research partners to limit the expectations and interruptions from other workers. The leaders of the company made the data generation possible by granting our partners permissions with pay and also reminded them of the group meetings.

The data generation process was in two phases. The first author or moderator conducted two meetings during the first phase of data generation between September and October 2017. The second phase of data generation took place in November 2017 and involved a meeting each with the two focus groups. The second phase was necessary to ascertain the consistency in the information generated during the first phase and to address issues not captured during the first phase. Apart from informal discussions between the focus group meetings during the first phase, the second phase of focus group meetings made it possible to capture, for example, the impact of the research on the participants. In phase 1, the meetings for the two groups took place the same day. However, in phase 2, the meetings took place on different days, but in the same week. The focus group meetings lasted for about one hour each. Before each focus group meeting, the moderator repeated the objectives of the project, the program and the number of times the meetings would take place. The moderator used a tape recorder after seeking permission from the members of the focus groups. We informed the participants that we would delete the taped information immediately after the research.

The discussions commenced with presentation rounds where each participant made his/her name, age, place of residence, educational background and workplace known to the group participants. The moderator then requested the participants to narrate some of their experiences from the last summer holidays. The soft start of the meeting was, following Douglas (1985) a form of 'chit-chat' or a way of warming up, building confidence and

cooling down the atmosphere surrounding the data generation process, before presenting the main themes for discussion. After the introduction, the moderator repeated the purpose of the study before asking concrete questions centring on work inclusion for discussion. The questions included; What are your experiences connected to work at AKO AS? What are your experiences connected to work at R100? What do you like about work in AKO AS? What do you like about work in R100? What work do you want to do in the future? Important issues discussed during the second phase centred on the impact of the study for our research partners.

To promote participation and continuity in the discussions, the moderator asked innovative questions; for example, What will you do if a local guesthouse or a restaurant invites you to work with them? Following Puchta and Potter (2004), the moderator asked questions related to well-known and highly valued workplaces in the town to help the participants to continue with the discussions. The moderator summarised the information after each focus group meeting to ascertain that there were no misunderstanding of the views presented by the participants. Together with our research partners, the moderator presented the data at AKO AS to make sure no vital information was left out and kept the leaders and employees abreast with the developments in the study. Also, our research partners presented the findings at two conferences, a lecture, political meetings, and secured their active role as important contributors to the research processes.

The use of focus groups in data generation to capture the experiences of our research partners with learning disabilities was not free of challenges. At times, during the process of data generation, it was difficult to have a natural flow of the conversation in the groups. For example, at the beginning of the focus group discussions, the participants were particularly reluctant to talk about their dreams and aspirations. A little encouragement from the moderator empowered the research participants to support each other and ended up providing clearer views about their dreams and aspirations.

The analytical process

Even though data analysis began during the data generation stage, our research partners did not take part in the transcription, processing and systematising processes that followed the data generation process. Their non-participation in the processes above is not because we do not think our partners are incapable of playing important roles in the processes of data analysis. Rather, due to time pressure, the authors decided that our partners could, in other ways, strengthen the process of data analysis by for example crosschecking and approving the analysed data. Also, we foresaw that their active role in presenting the findings at different fora might help restructure

the analysis and discussion of data. The authors chose a thematic analysis strategy (Ezzy 2002), coded and systematised the data under the emergent categories: dreams, aspirations and expectations connected to work in both AKO AS and R100. Also, we developed themes on the impact of the research for our partners, including information on the efforts that our partners made to achieve their dreams.

The findings

Work in the sheltered employment company AKO AS was organised such that some of the workers had the opportunity to do between two to three days work trials at R100 to gain experience working in an ordinary work setting. With the support of our research partners, we classified the findings section by their dreams and aspirations, experiences at AKO AS and R100 and research participation impact.

Dreams and aspirations

Information from focus group meetings shows that people with learning disabilities who work at AKO AS have different dreams and aspirations connected to workplace inclusion. The informants expressed their desires to work fully in an ordinary employment company, with or without remuneration. According to Olav, *'... the pay is important. One needs it to survive.'* Inger stressed that: *'Yes, of course, pays are important'*. The informants expressed the desire to become permanent employees in an ordinary employment company and receive normal salaries, not social security allowances. Silje pointed out that: *'... I do not see anything wrong with the social security allowance, but one would have wished to receive an ordinary salary'*. Silje reminded the group members that: *'... we are on social security allowances, and we can therefore not be on ordinary salaries'*. Silje pointed out that: *'... we do not earn much, but we are not at work to earn money, I am at work to be at work with my friends, to laugh, to do a job'*.

The informants specified the desire to participate in ordinary employment companies, for examples, shops, schools and restaurants. Bjorn said that he wanted a *'permanent position at an R100 shop ... to have an employee number, to be on the employee's list which specifies when he starts and closes from work and also has the key card to the shop'*. Bjorn expressed further his desire to *'serve clients at the lottery counter of R100'* as one concrete example of preferred work tasks in a shop.

Two of our informants expressed the desire to work in kindergarten schools. Gro pointed out that: *'I want to work in the kindergarten ... When I was in senior high school, I did my one-week voluntary work in a kindergarten'*. Inger who has the diagnosis 'cerebral palsy' informed that *'I want to work*

with children with cerebral palsy in a kindergarten'. One other informant Gro added that; 'If a café owner rings to ask me to work with them, I will be very happy ... Yes, I will be happy.'

The informants did not only exchange views on their wishes but also expressed what they would do or not do to realise their dreams. Jan referred to a conversation he held with a leader of the company on his desires to acquire the truck-drivers' license pointing out that: *'I have informed the leader about it, at least once... he said that others would be given the priority ... they will be allowed to enrol for and take the truck-drivers' license examination before me'.*

Bjorn made it known that: *'... have not had a conversation with the leader, our leader has no time, you know?'* To a question on whether they shared their views with their leader, Gro, pointed out: *'... no...not everybody knows about my desires and aspirations'.* Inger commented on the idea of sharing information with the leaders saying: *'... yes, a little, but I think I am a little unsure, it was a long time ago.'* Contributing to the question, Gro who had her practical week in a kindergarten during her junior secondary school time said that: *'I shall inform him... I want to be attached to a kindergarten.'*

Apart from the views connected to their dreams and aspirations, the participants of the focus groups expressed their experiences from work life in both the permanent adapted employment company AKO AS and the open competitive company R100.

Experiences from AKO as

The research participants referred to experiences on job satisfaction and continuous participation in the sheltered work company, AKO AS. According to Inger, *'I think it is good to be at work ... nice people, but it would have been better with other challenging work.'* Another informant Olav pointed out that, *'... I have friendly work leaders.'* A third participant Silje revealed that: *'... we are not in a hurry here; we don't have to work at a high pace the whole day.'* The expressions of another informant Olav: *'I like my friends'* and *'... it is important to meet people, not just sit there,'* were the contributions to discussions on what kept them working at AKO AS.

The participants also mentioned humour as an important factor that characterised their work-life at AKO AS. As an informant, Gro expressed *'we laugh and have a nice time at work ... we joke with each another, especially when we are out working with the garbage collection and distributing goods.'* Silje also mentioned the joy of doing a variety of work activities pointing out that: *'... does not make work boring.'* Stressing further that they enjoy what they do at AKO AS, Bjorn made it clear that: *'... I would have been in trouble*

without work life. Another participant, Olav, made it known that: *'I have been on sick leave for a few months, and I know what it means.'* Jan added that *'it was boring to stay at home the two months I was sick.'* For yet another participant, Inger, *'... work is important to learn something new.'*

The focus group participants with learning disabilities also shared their experiences relating to their knowledge and mastery of the work processes at AKO AS. Bjørn and Olav pointed out that they engage in firewood production. They take part in the processes of cutting, packing and transporting the wood to their clients. On their part, Bjørn, Olav and Gro transport garbage for the companies in town and deliver fruits at the workplaces of their customers. Working in the canteen is another central work of some of the employees of AKO AS. Inger & Silje described their work tasks in the canteen as including baking, making baguettes, serving warm dishes, finding clothes, washing and attending to customers. The participants stressed their roles, particularly at the pay-point of canteens as of high status.

Experiences from R100

The informants also expressed their experiences associated with their secondment by AKO AS to work a few days a week at different branches of R100. Our research participants expressed their and mastery of the different work processes at R100. According to Bjorn, *'I tidy up the shelves, pack the empty bottles and deliver goods.'* According to Jan, *'I arrange the goods ... I place the goods with older dates on the shelves first before adding the ones with newer dates.'* Jan continued, *'... I help customers when they ask for the location of goods.'* A third participant Olav was of the view that: *'I fold and press together paper boxes, put price tags on goods, pack goods, tidy the shop and assemble empty bottles.'*

The discussions did not only reveal the activities they mastered but also assignments that seem to arouse their pride and joy. As Jan revealed, *'I was proud when I was given a new assignment to wash the milk cooler weekly.'* Jan explained that *'it is a Food Safety Authority requirement.'* Jan made it also known that: *'I have started teaching new employees, show them around the whole shop, show them the bottles room and the deep-freezer.'* Jan added that, *'... it was nice to be selected to introduce others to the shop.'*

The research participants expressed other experiences connected to work at R100. Concerning their general experiences on job satisfaction at R100, Bjorn expressed that: *'I enjoy working in R100 ... the employees of R100 are very nice ... it is very nice to work there.'* Olav confirmed an earlier view pointing out that *'at R100 the employees are happy and smile a lot.'* For Jan, *'I take my lunch break together with the other employees, but I am often alone in case the others do not have time.'* Our participants also mentioned that they

take part in various informal activities, including company parties/Christmas party. Both Bjorn and Jan pointed out that they are included in all aspects of the parties and join other workers *'eat and drink, sing, dance and quiz.'*

Research participation – positive outcomes

The research participants cited some instances of the positive impact that the participation in the research had on them. Some of our partners who previously were reluctant to express their views on their dreams with the leaders have been empowered to do so after joining the research. Jan narrated; *'Do you know what? I had a meeting with leadership, and they agreed to apply for funds for me to take the truck driving license I have been dreaming of without success'*. Jan elaborated that; *'Get a truck licence, and you can work at many places.'*

One participant made it known that after interactions with the leaders after their presentation of research findings, the attention of the leaders is now on how to get them into preferred jobs. Jan pointed out that when the position of a driver was vacant, the leaders offered him the opportunity. Jan clarified that *'Formerly, I used to work as an assistant to a driver of a mail delivery car, with the help of the leaders I now work as a driver'*.

Our partners also pointed out participation in the research has emboldened them to seek help to acquire jobs. Silje who wanted to work in a restaurant pointed out that, *'in the course of the study, I approached our leader to help me get a job of my choice, I wanted to work outside AKO AS, at a place where I can bake bread'*. Silje continued, *'I now have a contract to work one day in a week at the kitchen of an activity centre for the elderly.'* Silje was all joy when she expressed that; *'In Jan's car, you can find my work contract ... I will be baking bread and others ...'*

Our participants narrated other examples of the empowering outcomes of participating in the study. Jan proudly informed the audience during our presentation at a conference in Norway that he has had salary increases at R100 after their participation in the study gained popularity. The participation in the study seems to have contributed to increased awareness on the situation of people with learning disabilities in the work market. The two research partners and the moderator of the focus groups have since the inception of the study had invitations to present their findings at different fora in and outside their city of residence.

Discussions

Our data indicate that the participants of the sheltered employment company AKO AS have diverse experiences with implications for their inclusion in ordinary working life. The research participants with learning disabilities

shared experiences connected to their participation in practical work tasks at AKO AS and R100 and expressed their views on their work roles and future aspirations. Their participation in the study as research partners also seems to have empowered them to pursue their work inclusion dreams.

The desire for valued employment in ordinary employment companies

The findings indicate that some of our research participants wanted to work fully in ordinary employment companies. They had the desire to learn to drive a truck, work in a restaurant, in a cafe or a kindergarten. The expressed desires of our research partners are in line with earlier research that indicates that people with learning disabilities often want to participate fully in ordinary working life (Reinertsen 2012). Our research participants would like to be in a non-segregated arena, and they would do all they could to avoid what Wolfensberger (1972) described as devaluation. Like other employees, they would not like to live up to expectations as devalued workers, but occupy what Kristiansen (1993) may describe as socially valued roles, and enjoy all that is highly valued by all employees in ordinary companies. They would like, for example, to work in a shop, acquire an employee number and a key card to the shop. The informants also wish to have their names on the employee's list and to register lotto coupons of their clients. It is likely that by identifying with the valued work tasks, our informants may assume what Swain and French (2000) may label as positive social identities, and not the negative identities often associated with people with one or other form of disability. When people with learning disabilities experience devaluation, because of discrimination, as some of our participants who expressed desires to change their current work situation have experienced, their ability to assume affirmative selves and the motivation to participate in working life may lessen. Reduced participation in working life may, in effect limit their chances of realising their dreams to be a part of work-life of interest to them.

The participants were not only interested in jobs in which they were previously socialised in, and the work processes they have internalised, but also want to expand their scope by aiming at occupations where they could gain new knowledge. When the research participants exhibited interest in gaining new knowledge through their desire to adopt other occupational areas, they portray their unceasing commitment to live up to their dreams of working in an ordinary company. The exhibition of the desires to learn new things in new jobs is also a declaration that people with learning disabilities are capable of engaging in other work activities than people traditionally expected of them. When participants themselves named the different occupations in which they would like to spend their working life, they contributed to the

saving of time and energy necessary to identify the resources and possibilities for ordinary or open competitive work inclusion for people with learning disabilities. As pointed out by the European Union of Supported Employment (2010), acquiring the interests, ambitions, needs, assumptions and background experiences of potential employees is vital for the work inclusion process. The efforts of our research participants to provide information about other jobs they dream of, is, therefore, an important step in facilitating the tasks of people whose job it is to promote workplace inclusion for all.

The focus group participants also pointed out that money was important for survival but did not arouse their motivation to participate in working life. The de-emphasis on money, as an important motivation for participation in work-life, that our research partners attached to work, aligns with the findings of previous research on working life in Norway (Kassah 2008; Tøssebro 2010; Ellingsen 2011; Reinertsen 2015; PROBA 2016). For Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014), motivation is important in the processes of workplace inclusion. On the other hand, motivation for work depends on different factors. Frøyland and Spjelkavik explained that *'For some, the economic and self-sufficiency are the most important motivation factors to participate in work, for others, it may be job satisfaction and social network.'* Job satisfaction and social network seem, therefore to overweigh the desires of our research partners to engage in working life. On the part of one of our research partners, an important motivation to work was to help others with a similar diagnostic condition. The desire of the research participant to engage in work activities to help others in the same situation does not only signify the selfless nature of the workers with learning disabilities. Also, the culture of devoting one's working life to helping others seems to be a desirable work virtue that may easily open the employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities who have the desire to be a part of ordinary work-life. The expression of the desire to help others with similar conditions also gives a strong signal that they are capable of working in any setting irrespective of their disabilities.

Experiences of trust and belonging

The research participants experienced other motivating encounters that may have increased their desires for participation in ordinary companies. Some of the research participants mentioned that the employers offered them additional tasks at their places of attachment at R100. When people with learning disabilities are assigned additional tasks at work, for example, to train newcomers and to ensure hygienic conditions in the shop, this seems to be a declaration of trust. Trust, according to John Locke (1963), is *'vinculum*

societatis' or the bond of society. For Hollis (1998), our dealing with humans in society depends on trust. In our context, the honour given to our research partners through assigning them tasks they are proud of seems to have been born out of trust. It is an important indication of a strong bond or relations between the workers with learning disabilities and their employers. The feelings of trust, as a result, the new tasks the employers assign to them may also lead to feelings of pride that they have become valuable members of the company. These feelings may, in effect, have implications for motivation, mastering of work tasks and eventual inclusion in other valued work processes in the company.

Apart from the experiences of trust, the research participants also experience feelings of togetherness at work. Despite the mention by one informant that it happens that he eats lunch alone when others are busy working, the employees seem to have close relations at work. While one can experience eating alone as a sign of reject or discrimination, the explanation that the practice occurs at times when others are busy indicates that it was not a regular practice that could affect their feelings of togetherness. Our research partners expressed that in addition to laughing, sharing of jokes while on their work errands, they also participate in social arrangements and have a nice time together. When the research participants experience the feelings of togetherness, this is an indication that they are all committed members of the same company. The feelings of togetherness that workers with learning disabilities experience at AKO AS is also an important aspect of what it is to be a part of a work-related social network (Bourdieu 1986). While the participant who at times eats alone may have felt rejected and denied the chance to enjoy the benefits of the work inclusion, the feelings of togetherness by the other research participants who have their attachment days in R100, are likely to expand with an increasing social network. The participants will then be able to access the social capital (Bourdieu 1986) that is inherent in the increased network. The participation in an extended network and access to social capital by the workers with learning disabilities may strengthen their ability to secure a job and meet desires to be a part of all-inclusive working life.

Ordinary employment challenges- integrated sheltered and ordinary work as a way out?

Even though the research participants expressed great desires to work in ordinary companies, they were also aware of the problems associated with working fully in ordinary work settings. The findings in this study indicate that work at AKO AS is not as stressful as one in the ordinary company R100. The expression by one of our research partners that work at AKO AS

does not make them work in a hurry and that they do not have to work at a high tempo a whole day indicates that the opposite may be the case at R100. The view that work in ordinary companies takes place in a high tempo is not new to the literature on disability and work (Kassah and Kassah 2009; Ryan and Thomas 1980). The employees at AKO AS seem to engage in the transportation and delivery of goods, which require good client/worker relations at a manageable pace. While it is difficult to reduce the tempo at work in many ordinary companies, the employees of AKO AS seem to have the opportunity to work at a relatively slower tempo, and avoiding stress. Like all other workers, when people with learning disabilities engage in high tempo work, the stress and pressure over time may have implications for their health. When the expectations towards people with learning disabilities to perform a work task are too high, stress and poor health may be the inevitable consequence. Stang (2006) refers to stress reduction as an important element of the empowerment process. With limited empowerment, an expectation of high work-related stress from people with learning disabilities working in ordinary companies may affect their chances of achieving their desires to be a part of all-inclusive working life.

A way of managing stress and at the same time realising the dreams of working life in an ordinary company may be to expand the integrated work alternative to include many people with learning disabilities. Adopting integrated work means keeping to the pragmatic alternative where most employees can have the opportunity to engage in work in both sheltered and open work settings. The suggestion to expand the offer of integrated work does not imply that those who can fully take part in ordinary companies should not have the right to do so. The sheltered employment company becomes, therefore, a form of preparatory arena, where workers with learning disabilities can acquire work experiences and confidence, and at the same time be able to cope with working life in an ordinary employment setting (Frøyland and Spjelkavik 2014). A flexible combination of work activities in sheltered employment and ordinary employment companies may provide a balanced work atmosphere that people with learning disabilities may manage with reduced stress. It seems that the view of Bond (2004) that an integrated approach with ordinary employment as the goal may have a better effect on the strategy of inclusive work.

Experiences of empowerment

The findings revealed the empowering impact of making people with learning disabilities partners in this study that focused on the enhancement of their opportunity to be a part of the desired working life. As indicated earlier, interactions between our research partners and AKO AS leaders have

enlightened the leaders to see and address the felt needs of some of our partners. Also, our partners were emboldened by their participation in the study to engage leadership to meet their dreams of engaging in a desired work-life. Our partners also engaged in creating awareness on workplace inclusion for people with learning disabilities. The research dissemination activities after the first focus group meetings seem to indicate that some of our partners overcame the forces of powerlessness, and employed counter-power in ways that promoted their dreams for inclusion in working life. People with disability are often the powerless occupants on the hierarchy of employers' lists, and gain little access to the job market. As Plummer (2010) indicated 'The powerless come to lack the resources, the authority, the status and the sense of self that the powerful have'. Any activity, including research participation that contributes in empowering and reshaping the identities of disabled people, may, in effect, contribute in whipping up the interest of employers to engage people with learning disabilities in working life.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented and discussed the experiences and aspirations of people with learning disabilities who participated in a sheltered employment company that made provisions for some of their employees to acquire work experience in an ordinary company in Norway. The article also sought to highlight the impact that participation in research might have had on our research partners. The main goal was to explore and generate knowledge that might empower people with learning disabilities, making their voices the basis for influencing policies on their inclusion in ordinary working life. We generated qualitative data for the study from two focus groups discussions and informal meetings after the focus group discussions. The study grounded on the inclusive research strategy which involved including the participants in research processes of interest to them. The participants took part in focus group discussions, crosschecked and approved the transcribed data. Their participation in informal meetings before, during after the focus group meetings with the first author contributed to the shaping of the analysis and discussions of emergent themes. Our partners also participated in the dissemination of the findings at different fora after the first phase of data generation.

The findings that emerged from the data analysis included the dreams and aspirations of the participants on preferred working life and their experiences connected to work in both sheltered and ordinary work settings. Apart from the adverse information about a research partner who had to eat at times alone at R100, the findings indicate that the participants have a great desire to be a part of ordinary work settings. They expressed the joy of

working in a setting that raised their status and reduced their experiences of devaluation. Also, they enjoyed the feeling of being trusted. The combination of the work at a sheltered workplace and the two to three days' work trials in an ordinary company seemed to have given our partners a unique work experience that might help promote the Norwegian inclusive work agenda. In other words, the participation of our research partners in integrated work may increase their opportunity to eventually realise their dreams of working, even though partially, in an ordinary work setting.

While integrated work may have a stress-reducing effect on some participants with learning disabilities, it may be stressful for others. One should, therefore, not prescribe integrated work to all people with learning disabilities without reservations. The fact that participants expressed reservations on the work tempo in the ordinary work setting indicates that it may be necessary to reconsider the work task combinations in integrated or sheltered employment –ordinary employment companies.

Our findings indicated that employers, at times, neglected the desires of the research participants. One may understand the neglect of some of the dreams of the employees with learning disabilities in terms of their limited experience in expressing their dreams and aspirations. The impact of participating in this inclusive research inspired study gave our research partners the chance to express themselves. The study promoted empowerment (Askheim 2012) as some of our partners who previously were reluctant to discuss their needs with the leaders of the company took up the challenge during the process of the research. Also, they developed an interest in seeking help to acquire jobs of their desire.

Research on the experiences of employees with learning disabilities is important for policies on workplace inclusion in Norway. Even though there is a need for further research on the inclusion of people with learning disabilities in working life, it is equally important to direct research to cover the experiences of leaders of sheltered employment companies. A focus on the leaders may help create opportunities for work-life inclusion for their employees with learning disabilities.

Disclosure statement

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