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Kari Nes: The first decade of the 21st century: A Backlash for Inclusion in Norwegian Schools?

Abstract: In Norway inclusive education formally is in place. But formal rights may conceal a different reality. Students are hardly ever excluded from education, but quite a few risk exposure to exclusionary mechanisms within the common education. After briefly presenting the Norwegian context, threats to inclusion are discussed, particularly within special education. A case story introduces the account.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Norway, threats to inclusion, exclusionary mechanisms

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1. Anne and her school

Anne is a student in grade 8 attending her neighbourhood school in Lillehammer, a small town in Norway. She cannot walk or talk much, having substantial and complex learning and social difficulties. Most of her lessons take place with special staff in a small room next to the classroom of her peers. Sometimes a few other students join her in the small room, and sometimes Anne takes part with the others, especially in the swimming lessons - which she very much enjoys - or in the breaks.

The school principal says: "My hope is that Anne, after she has left school, when meeting peers in town, they will stop and ask how she is. If that happens, we have achieved a lot. The alternative would have been to send her out of the local area, and nobody would have known her" (Munthe-Kaas, 2004, p. 10). Anne needs a lot of support outside school as well. "Team Anne" is established, consisting of the parents, health and care staff and school staff. One of the professionals is the coordinator of the team. "Now I can just be mum, and not the organizer of help, not the secretary, coach and all the other roles I had to fill before" (Anne's mother) (Munthe-Kaas, 2004, p. 11).
There are more stories like Anne's, but it is probably not correct to claim that it is typical for inclusion in Norway as seen from a disability point of view. An option for a student in Anne's situation might have been to attend a small group with other multiply disabled students in a school further away. The school in question would be a mainstream school with a special department, joined by disabled students recruited from a larger area. To send their children to departments of this kind is a choice made by some families where such an alternative exists. There is an increase in the use - and establishment of - similar groups for students with impairments in later years. Is this a failure for inclusion? After looking into the Norwegian context we will return to this question.

2. Context

Norway has among the highest proportion in the world of its learners attending a common, free and local mainstream state school, more than 97%, "regardless of abilities and aptitudes, age, gender, skin colour, sexual orientation, social background, religious or ethnic background, place of residence, family education or family finances" (Educationdirectorate, 2008). Less than 0.5% are in special schools. 2.2 % of all pupils in compulsory school age attend private schools. The right to free schooling for all also applies to upper secondary education. For learners with disabilities the United Nations' requirements seem to be met, in principle at least: *"Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live".* [1]

Historically in Norway exclusion from education should be a thing of the past. The school for all has been an ambition for more than 100 years. Increasingly after World War II various laws have ensured the education of vulnerable groups, partly in separate systems though. From 1975 the Education Act became one for all children, and legally speaking it ensured the integration into mainstream education of learners with impairments or defined special educational needs. But this right to integration was not unconditional, and some segregated provisions continued to exist. What also happened from the beginning of the 1970s was that the common compulsory unitary school was extended from 7 to 9 years; now it is 10 years (children start school when they are 6). In this unitary school there is no permanent streaming according to abilities; as the main rule the educational differentiation is to take place within the class. This is part of the overarching principle of *adapted education* in Norwegian schools, as it was called when introduced in the seventies. The principle still applies.

The 1990s meant major steps regarding inclusion in education. After years of preparation, from the beginning of the decade state special schools as well as the institutions for the intellectually disabled closed down. Hence, the vast majority of learners categorised as having special educational needs were and are educated in the ordinary schools. A support system was established to offer qualified special education locally. Former special schools became competence centers to support local schools and parents/carers as well as local expertise and advisors. Through the educational reforms of the nineties the very concept *inclusion* entered the vocabulary of national documents (1997). After a long history of discrimination the indigenous Sami population of Norway now achieved rights to their own curriculum in the Sami language. The deaf community received status as a language minority group with intrinsic rights to education in *their* first language, sign language.

3. Inclusion 'in Norwegian'

"Equitable, inclusive and adapted education are overarching principles in school" (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006a, p. 85). In the latest education reform, the so called *Knowledge Promotion,* the emphasis on inclusion from the nineties is continued. Generally, formulations from UNESCO documents seem to correspond with the wide view of inclusion explicitly and implicitly adopted in Norwegian policy documents:

Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated in the mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to respond to the diversity of learners.

It aims to enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem. (UNESCO, 2003, p. 7).

Despite the expressed wide view of inclusion, the perceptions of the concept differ greatly within Norway, not unlike other countries: A common understanding of the term inclusion is to restrict it to students with a disability or categorised learning problems. Limiting inclusion to the social aspects of education is another way of addressing just a part of the whole. Increasingly, inclusion is used in policy documents to characterise the relationship between the linguistic and cultural majority and the minorities.

Inclusion is seen as a *process* of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities. (UNESCO, 2003, p. 7)

It is worth noticing that in the quote above the emphasis is on participation in learning as well as social participation; it is not merely a question of place. Based on this system-oriented and non-categorical view of inclusion, the main question to ask is: *is the school inclusive?* not: *is she or he included?* Some would define the following case as integration, not inclusion: a 'special' student enters a 'normal' class (Haug, 2010). Stigmatisation and even exclusion accompany such a situation, according to Emanuelsson (2001). Inclusion has to be seen as a process, not as a state for a person. Having said this, it is of course relevant to ask on an individual level how the learners - all learners - and their carers feel about participation and learning in the school. Information about this will support the schools' efforts to develop inclusively. All in all, if we listen to the authors of the Index for Inclusion, moving inclusion forward means developing first of all the cultures and values of the school as well as the policies and practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). In the case of Anne the principal and the local authorities had a principled approach to inclusion, a view which has to be shared by the staff, students and carers. Creating inclusive cultures is about creating a collaborating and stimulating community in which everyone is valued (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

In a Norwegian context the implementation of inclusive education is closely intertwined with *adapted education*, briefly mentioned above. So what is that? Let us look at what is said by national authorities in short:

Adapted education

The school owner (the local or county authority), and the administration and staff at the educational institution must undertake to provide satisfactory and adequate teaching based on the individual's abilities and aptitudes. Adapted education involves choosing teaching material, methods and structures to ensure that each individual develops the basic skills and satisfies the competence objectives. This means that the teaching must be adapted on the individual and group levels.

Adapted education does not mean that all teaching is individualised, but that all aspects of the learning environment take the variations among the pupils (…) into consideration. (Education-directorate, 2008).

What then is the relationship between *adapted education* and *inclusion*? According to the same policy documents "*Inclusive education focuses on the common community while bearing in mind the consequences for the individual. Adapted education focuses on the individual while bearing in mind the consequences for the common community*" (Education-directorate, 2008).

So far the inclusion ideals. But is inclusion to be found out there in reality? Below possible exclusionary trends will be discussed, but let us here just mention a few examples of actual inclusive development in schools. Anne's school is real, and others of the same kind. In the first years of the decade there seemed to be widespread sympathy for inclusive ideals in the country; in a study about 90% of teachers and parents/carers agree that very different children should join the same class. 88% of teachers and 97% of the parents felt that all children in the catchment area should be able to attend their local school (Nes, 2004)[2]. This view does not rule out tolerance for lessons out of class for language minority students or students with 'special educational needs', since such lessons may be seen as part of the general ambitions of the school to adapt education for all. However, the practicing inclusive classroom teacher is there too, and ethnographic studies find that her main characteristics are (Mæland, 2004; Moen, 2004):

- a good relationship to the students

- good knowledge of the subject matter

- collaboration with all stakeholders in the school

- giving rewarding and relevant feed-back to the children

In other words, one might say that it is nothing very particular about this kind of inclusive skills, skills that are contained in the profile of 'the good teacher'.

On a societal/legislation level the last years have brought legislation about discrimination: Law prohibiting discrimination caused by ethnicity, religion etc (2006) and Law prohibiting discrimination caused by disability (2009). Universal design and universal access are part of the latter. There is also an Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud established.

4. Threats to inclusion: Exclusion from and within education

Inclusion is about preventing exclusion **from** education, but also about reducing exclusion **within** education (UNESCO, 2003). From the nineties on the quality of the education given in Norway has been questioned in different ways, for learners in special education as well as for learners perceived to be without special needs. The numbers of excluded children appear to be very low, but this formal inclusion may not be what it seems. For one, it is well known that being together in a school does not guarantee inclusive practice. For instance, officially very few children are in special schools, but, the teaching in the mainstream schools may be organized in tracking or special groups etc., despite the official inclusion policy (see below about the development in special education) (Haug, 2010). The official statistics do not capture this. Another example is the double nature of special education described in *The Janus-face of Special Education*, the main report from a national research program (Haug, Tøssebro, & Dalen, 1999). The doubleness appeared for instance when so-called integrated students with special educational needs (SEN) were frequently withdrawn from class for support lessons designed for their benefit, while clearly benefitting the classroom teacher who got an easier task with the remaining class. The organisation of special education was given much attention in the research programme, not so much what went on in

teaching and learning. Haug & al.(1999) found that the psycho-medical paradigm prevailed in the inquiries (Clark, Dyson, & Millward, 1995).

In the 2000s more reports drew attention to aspects of education which may have exclusionary effects. Publications in the national research program evaluating the curriculum reform of 1997 referred to classroom research in which an absence of clear expectations of the pupils was noted (Imsen, 2004; Nes, Skogen, & Strømstad, 2004). In many classrooms the teachers did not intervene much, and students organized their own work, mostly individually and often self-regulated. A lot of tasks and activities were described, but the purpose of them was not always clear to the participants. Not all children could profit from such an approach; some children were left to themselves working (or not working) without a purpose, clearly not utilising their potentials (Klette, 2007). An OECD country report about Norway, referring to similar observations, talked about "the predominance of a culture where children are underchallenged" (Mortimore, 2004). I would describe this as exclusionary trends within education. So does Dale (2007), finding teachers interpreting adapted education in ways that allow some of the students to do 'other things' and as a result become excluded from learning in the school subjects.

Bias in learning outcome is another effect of exclusionary mechanisms in seemingly inclusive educational settings. Groups of students systematically achieve less than their peers, dependent on the educational level or linguistic and cultural background of their families, or whether you are a boy or a girl. In brief, it does not 'pay' to be a minority boy with parents with little education. It is well documented that these differences between groups in school have increased in recent years (Haug, 2010; Kjærnsli, 2007; Markussen, Frøseth, & Grøgaard, 2009). The number of students with a minority language or cultural background has increased. In Oslo about 30 % of the pupils in school do not speak Norwegian as their first language, and in several schools Norwegian speaking students are the minority. Even if many of the minority students do very well in the education system, as a group they risk meeting lower expectations and getting poorer results than their peers (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007a). However, educational level among parents seems to make the strongest impact on achievement, implying that minority students from well educated families do as well as their peers and sometimes better (Bakken, 2003). The importance of developing a well functioning mother tongue is well documented (for instance Cummins (2000), and linguistic minority pupils have a right - on certain conditions - to receive additional support in learning their native language and in learning Norwegian. However, this right is not very strong, and many students do not receive adequate support (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007a). The effect for some may be poor learning outcome.

In upper secondary education there is even a case of exclusion **from** education: Alarming reports about increasing drop-out rates have appeared throughout the 2000s. This is occurring with the same biases as mentioned above: In upper secondary education only 50 % of students with parents whose educational level is only compulsory school complete. This mainly happens in vocational programs. Among students with well educated parents the completion rate is 78%. For both groups the completion rate after one or two extra years in school is higher (Markussen, 2009).

At the end of the 20th century Tjeldvoll (1998) studied the prevailing values in education in the Northern countries and came to the conclusion that a more "rugged individualism and less concern for collective values and interests are observed in Scandinavia" (Tjeldvoll, 1998 p. xv). He feared in its wake less progressive and collectivistic pedagogy, the abandoning of the principle of comprehensive schooling, and an increased privatisation of education. He wondered whether a demand for quality would lead to greater inequality through private provisions for those who can afford it. The prophesy about privatisation has not come true to any large extent, but Tjeldvoll was right about the pedagogy within the public school, which is now far less influenced by interdisciplinary methods like project work (Turmo, 2009). Instead, competence objectives, attainment and testing have entered the centre of the scene:

In 2000 Norway joined the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The results were shocking: Norway was below OECD averages in reading as well as mathematics and natural sciences. Further results of the PISA inquiries every third year throughout the decade have not been encouraging either: Results got worse in all disciplines. TIMSS and PIRLS[3] showed the same negative development for the results of Norwegian students (Kjærnsli, 2007). As a more or less direct result of the seemingly negative development in core skills among Norwegian students, compulsory *national tests* were introduced. The construction of the tests builds upon PISA and PIRLS, and their intention is to map if the students' basic skills were in accordance with the competence aims of the curriculum. Through the test results students, teachers, parents, authorities and others would receive information in order to be able to improve the situation (Education directorate).

PISA and the national tests now form part of a comprehensive system of assessment and testing (Education directorate). Before the 2000s the majority of Norwegian politicians - and many teachers and researchers - were reluctant to accept national and comparative testing (Sjøberg, 2005). Apart from the

final exams, unlike most countries in Europe, Norway did not have any kind of national tests or quality assessment procedures which revealed the students' or schools' results for comparison. But this changed, due not least to PISA results and OECD country reports. A need to know more about what children actually did learn in school made the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) agree to "A culture for learning", a white paper suggesting a programme for quite extensive assessment and testing, with the results being made public (Utdannings- og, 2004; Utdannings-og-forskningsdepartementet, 2004).

What have PISA and the other tests got with inclusion to do? The answer to that question is about what counts in school, what counts as learning results? (cf Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2007). "Something dramatic has happened in Norwegian schools. Not long ago values, norms and ideals were debated. Now only numbers count. What has happened?" asks Sjøberg (2005, p.62, my translation), himself a natural scientist and a 'Didaktiker'. Inclusion is about putting values into action (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), and the conversation about which values and how to realise them has to go on continuously. The first time national tests in reading were held - and on later occasions as well - there were examples of parents were asked by the school to keep their son or daughter home on the day of the test in order not to influence the results negatively[4]. I find that checking up on learning results is a necessary part of education, but my question is to what extent the assessment and testing systems overrule other basic aspects of the intentions with schooling. What about the key competence of 'interacting in heterogeneous groups', including ability to relate well to others, to cooperate and to solve conflicts? This competence is one of three key competences introduced by the OECD (2005). Even if efforts are made to ask for critical reflection in the tests, PISA mainly measures just one of the key competences, the one about 'using tools interactively '[5].

It should be added that aspects of the assessment trends of later years not only may threat inclusion, but also support inclusive practice, for instance for students who are at risk of marginalisation. The 'assessment for learning' movement aims at developing the student's learning potential in a process, rather than just assessing a learning product in the end (Wiliam, 2009).

5. Inclusion and special education: Recent developments

What tendencies can be identified in education for pupils with a disability or identified special educational needs? In order to receive education adapted to them, some learners who cannot profit from the education offered, are by law entitled to special education. After an expert assessment, the 'statementing' procedure will ensure this, and the pupils will have an individual educational plan (IEP).

For the last couple of decades the main picture of special education in Norway has not changed much (Solli, 2008). However, recent statistics and reports about special education show that the number of pupils receiving special education, in integrated as well as segregated settings, has increased throughout the decade, mostly after 2007 (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009).

Figure 1
Number of pupils receiving special education in Norway 2002-2008. Compulsory education. Percent.
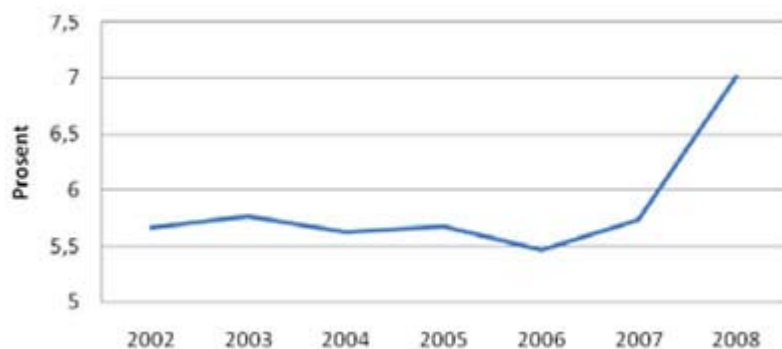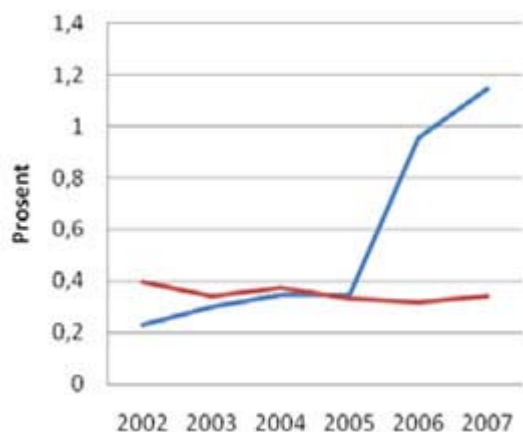

Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009 p. 88

The increase after 2007 seems dramatic. In the academic year 2009/10 a total of 7.9% of the learners receive special education[6]. However, it has to be added that in the 1990s the number of children in special education was higher than in the first years of the new century. Principals interviewed by Nordahl & Hausstätter (2009) felt that a level of about 5 % of the learners referred to special education was reasonable. Alongside the formal definition of special education an informal practice definition of special

education also exists (Markussen et al., 2009; Markussen, Sandberg, Lødding, & Frøseth, 2008): In addition to the learners categorized with special educational needs, in most schools special education is also offered to pupils who do not have the formal rights to it.

Pupils categorised as having special educational needs not only increase in number, they are increasingly taught in segregated provisions. According to national statistics 77% of the pupils receiving special education have most of their lessons in small groups or alone with the special teacher, outside of the ordinary class, but in their ordinary school (GSI, 2010). Placements in special provisions outside the local school are also increasing.

Figure 2
Number of pupils in segregated provisions. Compulsory education. Percent.
Red line: special schools. Blue line: special groups in mainstream schools.

Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009 p.130

Nordahl (2009[7]) assumes that the increase in the use of segregated provisions in Norway since 2005 is 100%! How does this correspond with the overall inclusion ambition? A change in attitudes towards a more accepting view of segregation seems to have taken place (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009), a change that can also be traced internationally (Rix 2008, here from Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). Rix sees this in line with an individualistic trend which sees schools as service institutions. In England for instance, some schools present themselves as specialist schools, giving the impression of being more professional on the specific needs of the individual child than the ordinary school.

Other characteristics of Norwegian special education have been quite stable during the last decades. The social bias is one, as in education in general, as commented above. Biases of special education exist in primary and lower secondary education as well as upper secondary. Data from upper secondary schools particularly clearly reveal that there are more students receiving special education or extra help and support

- among boys than among girls
- among non-western immigrants and descendants than among the majority youth
- when the parents are less-well educated
- when there are few compared to many books in their home
- when the student is living with only one parent (rather than both mother and father)
- when the student received poorer grades in lower secondary (Markussen et al., 2009)

The authors of the report from upper secondary education comment on these data:

We do not suggest or imply causality, but we would argue that these relationships indicate that some of the difficulties creating need for special education or extra help and support have been created through the lives special education students have been living in their families, in the education system and in society; the need for special education is partly socially constructed. (Markussen et al., 2009)

For special education in upper secondary education Markussen et al. (2003) also find that being in class is an advantage for students with special educational support in the sense that they get better grades, compared to those receiving their special education while belonging to special classes. Some students in

upper secondary schools did well in separate provisions too. However, more important for the outcome than being in or out of class was "the presence of a high level of pedagogical and didactical reflections in the schools, and a very close follow up of the students" (Markussen et al., 2009). Some of the research in upper secondary special education also showed that the students without identified special needs did not lose academically when having students with a special education programme in their classes (Grøgaard, Markussen, & Sandberg, 2002).

Other significant aspects of Norwegian special education in the last decades include the following: About 1/3 of the special educational lessons are not conducted by special teachers, but by teacher assistants. These members of staff do not have demands on their formal qualifications, so the quality of the education is thereby threatened (Haug, 2010). Further, there are huge variations throughout the country in numbers of pupils receiving special education, ranging from 0 to about 20% in a municipality. The reasons for this include lack of a systematic professional attitude to the use of special education as an educational strategy, according to Nordahl & Overland (1998). It is argued that the general quality of the adapted education offered is related to the number of children being referred to special education: High quality of the adapted education for all means fewer references, low quality means more references to special education (Utdannings-og-forskningsdepartementet, 2004). Even if pupils have a legal right to special education and thereby extra funding, local educational authorities have a choice as to whether emphasising - through funding - the quality of general education including extra support, or whether earmarking larger sums for pupils with a statement of special educational needs.

A recent report to the government about special education, *Right to learning,* addresses the challenges referred to above (Midtlyng, 2009). Some of the main proposals in the report concern early intervention and strengthening adapted education for all. All children and adults should have a legal right to additional support, interdisciplinary when needed, and expertise should be moved from some of the competence centres closer to local users. The notion 'special education' is suggested removed from the law. Some of the critics of the proposals claim that including all in the same classroom is being idealised in the report and that the children with the most substantial difficulties are not paid due attention. If the rights of the most vulnerable students are not better secured in national policy, there are worries that they may be subject to poor funding related to local public economy (Utdanning 21/2009).

6. Early intervention - a matter of in(ex-)clusion?

It is widely accepted that if suspicions about learning problems arise, the earlier intervention the better. However, in Norwegian special education this principle does not seem to be followed.

Figure 3
Number of pupils receiving special education in each year. Percent.
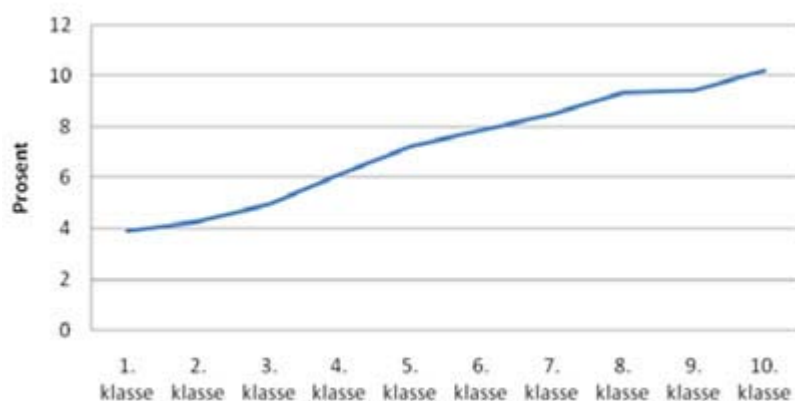
Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009 p. 89

In grade 1 about 3.9% of the pupils receive special education, in grade 10 about 10.2%. This picture is seen as part of a pattern which tends to reproduce social inequalities in education instead of preventing them by offering help at an early stage. A common education system as a means of reducing differences of social class has been an official policy goal for about a hundred years, but in some respects the intentions seem to fail. As we have seen, there are systematic biases as to participation and learning outcomes for

students due to social class, gender and ethnicity.

A white paper intending to present a policy for how the education system can make a greater contribution to social equalisation, emphasised the need for early intervention (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006b). But the gradual increase in the reporting of special educational needs from grade 1 (low incidence) to grade 10 (high incidence) as seen in the figure above, has been largely unchanged for many years. OECD (2004) states that Norwegian education generally does not have good strategies for identifying and following up pupils who are struggling. There is a lack of clarity as to what is expected in the lessons, and the testing and assessment procedures are not good enough, according to them.

Why is there this "wait-and-see" attitude to learning problems in young pupils instead of actively trying to solve the problems, ask Nordahl & Sunnevåg (2008). Do the teachers expect that the problems will be solved by the pupils themselves through maturation, or do they want to avoid stigmatising children unnecessarily by identifying the problems and/or referring them to special education? Perhaps the school or the teachers lack the competence to handle the challenges and do not quite know what to do? (Cf Nordahl & Sunnevåg (2008). Anyhow, a "wait-and-see" strategy will particularly hit pupils from homes with little capacity to support their children's school work, and social inequality will persist (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2007a).

7. A backlash for inclusion?

Norway, a country probably hoping to become the world champion in formal inclusion, faces many challenges in goal of attaining the gold medal for inclusive practice, if one looks behind the statistics: The number of students with identified special educational needs is increasing, and so is the number of segregated provisions. However, it is a matter of discussion whether this should automatically be seen as a failure for inclusion in all respects; that depends on what is meant by inclusion and by inclusion in relation to special education. For instance, to what extent is special education seen as a barrier to inclusion or a condition *for* inclusion? But I do see the upward curves in the graphs as being in conflict with the overarching educational policy aims and as alarming from an inclusion point of view. Furthermore, identified exclusionary practices within education include failure to intervene early enough, persistence of social inequality, under challenging students academically etc.

But, as we have seen, this is not the whole story. Documentation from many classrooms shows that there are schools and local educational authorities which are developing more inclusively. There also used to be a general approval of inclusive ideals among teachers and parents/carers, but the question is whether this is changing along more 'rugged individualistic' trends. We have insufficient data about possible changing attitudes during the last few years, but if changes towards less inclusive views are indeed taking place, and this is seen together with the special education and drop-out statistics, inclusion is at risk.

Inclusion in education is about policy and practices as well as cultures, attitudes and values. To move inclusion forward, inclusive values are essential. They need to be shared and to permeate the continuous development of learning and participation for all in practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). This has to happen locally since inclusion can only be defined as the embodiment of values in particular contexts (Ainscow et al., 2006).

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[1] *From article 24,* Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN, 2006.

[2] Part of the national evaluation of inclusion after the curriculum reform 1997.

[3] Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

[4] The newspaper Verdens Gang, November 10, 2004

[5] The third key competence is 'acting autonomously'.

[6] GSI, national education statistics, Oslo 2010.

[7] Nordahl, T. (2009) in the lecture Inclusive and adapted education in Norway today, Hedmark University College, November