

Invited Paper

Inclusive Education in Norway: Historical Roots and Present Challenges

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In Norway, inclusion in education is seen in a wide sense as increasing learning and participation for *all*. The historical background of inclusion in a country with a long tradition for inclusive schooling is reviewed but in this article inclusionary practices as well as exclusionary tendencies in the current situation are identified. Present challenges are discussed in national and international perspectives.

Key Words: a broad understanding of inclusion, exclusionary tendencies

The Understanding of Inclusion

In 2012 the *Queen Sonja award for equity and inclusion* was awarded to Fagerlund school, a Norwegian school for 6–13 year-olds in a small town. The school has 500 pupils of whom 80 do not speak Norwegian as their first language. All students in the local community with severe and less severe disabilities as well as students with behaviour and learning problems attend the school. According to the jury this school:

- Is working systematically, knowledge-based, and in a long-term perspective with the pupils' learning environment
- Is practising equity and inclusion in a way that makes each pupil experience being valued in an environment characterised by participation, trust and community
- Is characterised by good relationships between pupils and staff and among pupils—and with a good collaboration between school and home

(Befring et al., 2012, my translation)

As can be seen from this example, the understanding of inclusion is a broad one, not restricted to certain pupils, such as those with specific diagnoses, but

aimed at developing an inclusive learning environment for all. This corresponds with Norwegian policy guidelines where inclusive education is understood as value-based efforts to remove barriers to learning and participation for all (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006; Strømstad, Nes, & Skogen, 2004). In the policy documents the notion of inclusion is closely linked to the understanding of *equity* in education. On the system level, equity is about an overriding legislation, regulations and syllabuses, and on the individual level, adapting the education to individual abilities and aptitudes. To ensure equity in education for all, positive discrimination, not equal treatment, is required, (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2008). *Adapted education in a school for all* then may be the Norwegian definition of inclusive education, which means providing equal opportunities in a *unitary school*, “regardless of abilities and aptitudes, age, gender, skin color, sexual orientation, social background, religious or ethnic background, place of residence, family education or family finances” (ibid.).

A School for All? A Brief History of Inclusive Education in Norway

Influenced by the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), the notion of inclusive education entered Norwegian policy documents in the mid 1990s, but the spirit of inclusion dates far back. Along with other Scandinavian countries, Norway has a history of universal schooling. In the first half of the

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18th century free schools for children of *common men* were introduced, preceded by the claim of the Church that everyone should be able to read religious texts. A system with a free public school *for all* and private schools for those who could afford it, continued throughout the 19th century. Students with disability were mostly left to explore private solutions, but in 1881 a law was passed on schools for *the abnormal*, i.e. the blind, the deaf and the mildly intellectually disabled. Late in the 19th century, rights to seven years of education for *all* were stated, and emerging ideas about *the unitary school* continued into the 20th century as part of the nation-building process (Engen, 2010; Haug, 1999).

Nation-Building. Discriminatory Effects.

Up to 1814 Norway had been under Danish rule, and until 1905 the Swedish King was King of Norway. Building a new independent nation and its identity was seen as part of the task of the schools. A major goal of education in Norway and many other countries was to create nation-states in which all groups shared one dominant mainstream culture. It was assumed that ethnic and immigrant groups had to abandon their original cultures in order to fully participate in the nation-state. In the first half of the 20th century, an assimilationist conception of education existed in most of the Western democratic nation-states including Norway. In the nation-building process—seemingly leading to more liberty and democracy—the Norwegifying assimilation policies implied exclusion of minorities and their rights (Engen, 2010). This policy particularly hit the indigenous Sámi population. Sámi students were not allowed to use their mother tongue in schools until the end of the 1960s. Sámi is now an official language in Norway, along with Norwegian, which is spoken by most people.

We see that cultural and linguistic minorities were discriminated against (UN, 1976), but what about children with impairments or other *special needs* throughout the 20th century? The mainstream and special school systems continued, and after the Second World War the range of special schools was extended to cover five groups, including disruptive behaviour. Special classes in several ordinary schools also appeared in the cities (Haug, 1999). Placement for the *feeble-minded*, the intellectually disabled, and even *travellers* was decided by IQ-tests. Results indi-

cated whether you were to be sent to a special school or class, or, if your IQ was deemed too low, to institutions within the care system, not the school system. Sterilisation was frequently part of the decision for girls (Pihl, 2010). By these procedures some were deemed as ‘uneducable’ and were looked after by their families, later by health-care institutions.

Integration Reforms

The dual school system legislation existed for nearly 100 years from 1881 to 1975, when the act of special schools was abolished and the integration law came into force. From then on there has been one education act and in principle one common school for all children. All students now had their educational rights established by a common education act. A paragraph ensured the right to special education for those who needed it, preferably in the mainstream school.

The special school reform agreed on in 1975 did not take place until the beginning of the 1990s when the state special schools actually closed down. Some former special schools became *competence centers* to support local schools and parents. At the same time the institutions for intellectually disabled also closed down. According to the principles of normalisation, service, work, and education and so forth should become physically separated from the home—now outside the institutions—and be provided by the municipality (Nirje, 1992).

Inclusive Education in Norway—Present Status & Challenges

Setting aside the polished surface of *inclusion*, how does it look in reality? Below I will show on the one hand how inclusive practice on different levels can be identified, and on the other hand ask how possible exclusionary mechanisms may threaten inclusion. We are mostly talking about exclusions *within* education, only rarely exclusions *from* education (cf. UNESCO, 2003).

Inclusion is Practiced

About 97% of all Norwegian students aged 6–16 attend the common, free mainstream school, run by the local educational authorities (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2008). In that respect the Norwegian school system is among the most

inclusive in the world. No child, even if he or she is disabled, can be denied access to the local school. Girls and boys and high and low achievers from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds take part in lessons together, without permanent streaming according to ability. All children are the responsibility of the local school. Very few are in special schools; less than 1%, and about 2.2% of students in compulsory school age (6–16) are in private schools. All students are to receive differentiated and adapted instruction in the school nearby. In Oslo, 40% of the pupils are currently bilingual, but children who do not speak the language of instruction well, do have certain specific rights to adapted support. Sámi children have their own syllabus in Sámi language.

Special education is intended to ensure adapted and equitable education for persons who do not, or cannot, gain satisfactory benefits from regular teaching (Education Act §5-1). Thus, the right to special education is non-categorical. An expert assessment states whether the student has this right, and the content of special education in question. The right applies to pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary education. When special educational needs are stated, more resources are allocated in order to implement individual educational plan (IEP), usually in part time special education in connection with the ordinary class. If the impairments of the child are substantial, full time special education is assigned. External support is given locally by the educational/ psychological service. State competency centers support local schools in teaching low frequency groups (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011).

If we look beyond the systems, researchers have studied classroom teachers who practice inclusion to see what their main characteristics are: a good relationship to the pupils, a good knowledge of the subject matter, collaboration with all stakeholders in the school, and giving rewarding and relevant feedback to the children (Mæland, 2004; Moen, 2004). Children with multi-handicaps like the eighth grader Anne, are taught in their local school (Munthe-Kaas, 2004). Anne's lessons mostly take part in a little room next to her class, and sometimes in class with additional support. The head teacher said (translated): "My hope for Anne is that, 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 had been to send her out of the local area, and nobody would have known her" (ibid. p. 10).

Exclusionary Mechanisms I: Social Inequality is Reproduced

If you are a girl and your parents are well educated and speak Norwegian, generally speaking, your chances should be good in the Norwegian school system (Bakken, 2010; Dale, 2008). In Norway as in many other countries, boys, pupils from economically disadvantaged and working-class backgrounds and from linguistic and cultural minority groups are overrepresented in special education (Markussen, Frøseth, & Grøgaard, 2009; Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). The same groups do systematically worse than others when it comes to learning outcomes and even to the alarmingly high drop-out rate in upper secondary education. Further, average learning outcome as to literacy and numeracy is not satisfactory, according to PISA and other studies (Kjærnsli, 2007). Too many pupils, especially the talented children are probably under-challenged in class and hence under-achieving (Idsøe & Skogen, 2011; Mortimer, 2004). The intention of the politicians is to reduce the gap by improving the chances of boys and pupils from immigrant backgrounds and from socio-economically less privileged homes. The measures taken have not yet proven effective (Bakken & Elstad, 2012).

Exclusionary Mechanisms II: Increasing Exclusion in Special Education

Figure 1 shows how the number of pupils referred to special education has grown from 6% in 2003–2004 to 8.6% in 2012–2013. This has happened

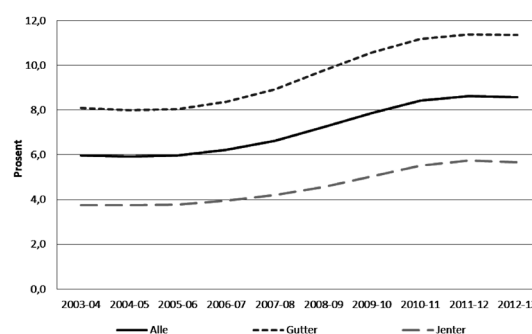


Fig. 1 Number of Pupils in Compulsory Education Receiving Special Education (unbroken line) from 2003–2004 to 2012–2013. Girls (lower line) and Boys (upper line). Percent. (GSI, 2013)

in a period where the intentions have been to *reduce* the need for special education by strengthening the general adaptation of education (St.meld. nr. 16, 2006–2007).

Figure 1 includes part time and full time special education, within and outside special classes or schools. In addition, individual support resembling special education is given to another about 10% of the pupils (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). The figure also reveals that about twice as many boys as girls are in special education, a ratio that has been stable for decades (Solli, 2005).

Figure 2 shows the number of pupils in segregated provisions. The number of special classes (horizontal line) has continued to rise after 2007, so there are now more pupils segregated than when the state special school system existed (Utdanning, 2012). For most pupils in question, beginning a special class means leaving the local area. Cases like Anne, a student with significant impairments attending her local

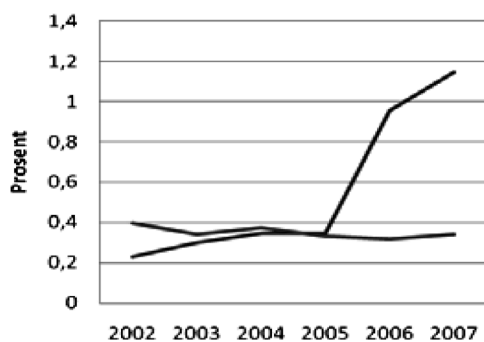


Fig. 2 Segregated Special Education. Number of Pupils in Special Schools (ascending line) and Special Classes (horizontal line). Percent. (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009, p. 190)

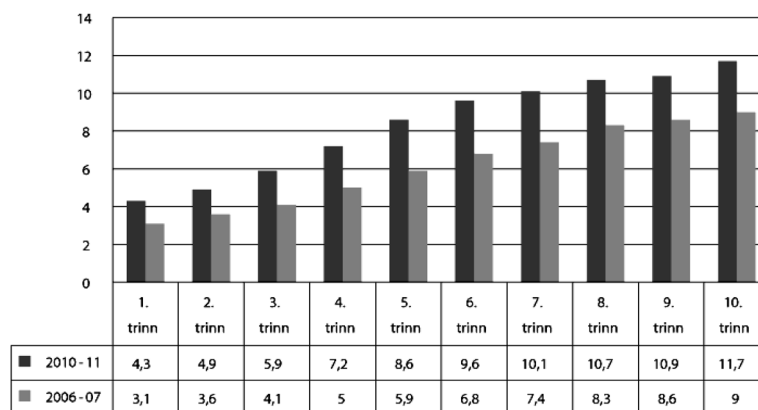


Fig. 3 Special Education from Year 1 to Year 10. Number of Pupils. Percent. 2006–2007 (grey) and 2010–2011 (black). (Meld.St. 18, 2010, p. 35)

school, as earlier mentioned, is becoming more and more an exception (Munthe-Kaas, 2004).

It is a paradox that while this segregation curve starts to point upwards, the UN convention on rights of persons with disabilities is ratified, saying among other things: “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” (UN, 2006 article 24). Another group of pupils experiencing increasing segregation are those conceived to be disturbing or disengaged. In some communities, *alternative schools* with more practical subjects in small groups have been established for pupils older than 13 years old, but increasingly, such arrangements pop up even for primary school pupils (Jahnsen, Nergaard, & og Grini, 2011).

Another ascending curve in Fig. 3 shows that just a few pupils, about 4%, receive special education in year 1, while nearly 12% in year 10, in contrast to the principle of early intervention.

A “wait-and-see” strategy seems to be prevailing, a strategy that will have particularly negative effects on pupils from homes with little capacity to support their children’s school work, which would allow persistence of social inequality according to the Ministry of Education which is suggesting strategies to counter this tendency (St.meld. nr. 16, 2006–2007). However, judging from the graph above, there is no increase, relatively speaking, in early intervention in special education.

Discussion

Too many students in the inclusive—more or less—Norwegian school system, in or outside special education, seem to be deprived of opportunities to learn and participate fully according to their potential. However, it is a matter of debate whether all increases in special or alternative education should automatically be seen as a failure for inclusion. Can they be on the contrary, signs of better adapted education for some students? Do these segregated groups/schools reinforce marginalisation, or do they prevent it? Nevertheless, similar increase is seen in other countries as well, a fact that is concerning many observers. For instance, Slee (2011) states that exclusionary practices are resilient and asks whether we accept a system of *sponsored and marginalised pupils*. Perhaps some exclusion are seen as “natural” (ibid).

In her article “The irresistible rise of the SEN industry,” Tomlinson (2012) claims that Governments do accept the funding of special education to deal with surplus groups in knowledge economies. Previously the slow and troublesome children mainly came from the working class, she says, but now the middle classes increasingly claim resourcing for children who are unlikely to achieve in a competitive market-driven school system, by asking for categories like ADHD that do not suggest that the parents are to blame. Actually, home and school may have common interests in defining the pupil’s problems medically (Brante, 2007). The quest for diagnoses may be one of the relevant factors behind the increase in special education in Norway (Mathiesen & Vedøy, 2012). During the first decade (1999–2010) of the new millennium the sales of ADHD medicines increased from Norwegian crowns 4 million to Norwegian crowns 184. The increase is bigger than in many other countries (Lunde, 2011).

Another relevant factor not only in Norway but internationally may be pressures from the professions in a situation where there is an expansion of special education and special education personnel, and in many countries simultaneously increasing inclusion in mainstream education (Mathiesen & Vedøy, 2012; Tomlinson, 2012). But in Norway what is happening in the way schools are run is probably affecting the exclusionary tendencies just as much, notably the increasing demands for measurable learning outcomes, implying more testing and less attention on

the overarching aims (Mathiesen & Vedøy, 2012; Sjøberg, 2005). A curriculum reform from 2006 underpins this development (St.meld. nr. 30, 2003–2004). In combination with an aggravated school economy and reductions in staff, children with learning problems more easily get pushed out (Mathiesen & Vedøy, 2012).

To increase learning and participation for all, the overarching aims and the fundamental values in education have to be recognised and visible for all participants (cf. Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Losing track of the basic values in all the demands on education can have exclusionary implications.

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