

Dominating Perspectives on Special Needs Education in Media

A document analysis of newspaper articles contributing to the public debates on Special Needs Education in Norway from 2014 to 2017

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ABSTRACT

Children and young people in Norway spend a considerable amount of time in the educational system, and some students receive special needs education both in and out of the class. The compulsory inclusive school in Norway is based on a principle of equal opportunity for all and aim to provide education based on their potentials that will prepare children for later life. Special needs education has been through many changes and reforms throughout educational history. Today, municipalities and counties are mainly in charge of schools and education, even though all schools follow the same curriculum. Special needs education is also a recurring and sometimes heated topic for debates in the Norwegian media. Newspapers and other news media play an important part in making information and debates on current events accessible to the public, as well as influencing politics.

In this study, document analysis is used to analyze the public debates concerning special needs education. After searching for newspaper articles using related words and phrases such as special needs education, inclusive school, and special schools, and using snowball sampling to find related articles, a great number of online newspaper articles were found. As this topic has been discussed in the media for some time, and is continuing to be discussed, it was decided that limiting the data material to articles published between 2014 and 2017 would be necessary. Through thematic reading, identification of themes and patterns, and with help from academic literature, this study examines who are present in the debates, what perspectives on special needs education and disability are used, and the themes that are discussed regarding special needs education in the debates. In addition, one of the interests was to see whether or not children and youth are present with their experiences in the educational system, and the representation of students is a topic of discussion in the study.

Theoretically, the study draws on social constructionism and the social studies of children and childhood, but other perspectives on education, disability and children are also presented.

Table of content

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
ABSTRACT	v
Table of content	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 ‘The public debates’ and media in Norway	1
1.2 The inclusive school	2
1.3 Research questions and aims	2
1.4 Terms used in the thesis	3
1.5 Structure of the thesis	3
2. Historical context	5
2.1 Integration as an international trend?	5
2.1.1 Salamanca Statement	6
2.1.2 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	7
2.2 National Trend	7
2.2.1 From the 1700s to World War II	7
2.2.2 After World War II	9
2.2.3 From the reforms of the 1990s	11
2.3 Summary	13
3. Theory	15
3.1 The social studies of children and childhood	15
3.1.1 Childhood as a social construction	15
3.2 What is a discourse?	16
3.3 Power relations	17
3.4 Space/place	18
3.5 Normality	20
3.6 Models of disability	21
3.6.1 Individual tragedy model	21
3.6.2 Social model of disability	22
3.6.3 Constructionist model of disability	22
4. Method	25
4.1 Methodology	25
4.1.1 Researchers pre-position	26
4.2 Initial research	26
4.3 Document analysis as a method	27

4.3.1 Reasons for choice of method	28
4.4 Research design.....	28
4.4.1 Translation.....	29
4.5 Data selection	29
4.5.1 Selection criteria.....	30
4.5.2 Document sources	31
4.5.3 Overview of documents.....	31
4.6 Data analysis.....	34
4.6.1 Coding	35
4.7 Limitations and challenges with the study	36
4.8 Ethical reflections.....	37
5. Representation and Perspectives.....	39
5.1 Who are present in the debates?	39
5.1.1 Re-appearing individuals.....	40
5.2 Who is not present?	41
5.2.1 Principals	42
5.2.2 Fear of repercussion?.....	43
5.3 The power of context.....	44
5.3.1 Emotional Setting	45
5.3.2 Children and youth for rhetorical purpose?	47
5.4 Retrospect view	48
5.5 Parental struggles with the system	48
5.6 Models of disability	50
5.6.1 The general thinking.....	50
5.6.2 An individual problem.....	51
5.6.3 A societal problem.....	53
5.6.4 A complex problem	53
5.7 Diagnoses	54
5.8 Summarizing thoughts.....	56
6. Major themes in the debates.....	59
6.1 ‘Out of the class’	59
6.1.1 Sense of belonging/social relations	63
6.1.2 Social exclusion within the classroom.....	65
6.1.3 Normality and normalization.....	66
6.2 The competent educator	67
6.2.1 Assistants as teachers	68
6.2.2 Resources.....	70

6.3 Content of the education.....	71
6.4 Inclusion as a tool for social learning?.....	74
6.5 The major themes summarized.....	75
7. Discussion.....	77
7.1 Media and power relations	77
7.2 Narratives	80
7.3 The topics of concern	82
8. Concluding summary	85
References	87

Chapter 1:

Introduction

The main focus of this thesis concerns children and youth who are considered to have ‘special educational needs’ in the Norwegian school system. The aim is to identify how these students are represented and positioned in debates in public media; an ambition which also includes questions of whether they are present themselves. The main data source consists of newspaper articles published between 2014 and 2017 that contribute to the public debates surrounding the education and experiences of children and youth considered to have ‘special needs’. The articles in the sample are written by various contributors, including for example journalists, politicians, persons who work in education, parents and the children and youth themselves. Examining the different articles, I will try to learn something about the way these students are talked about and presented by the various contributors in the debates as well as how children and youth write about their own experiences in this public arena.

1.1 ‘The public debates’ and media in Norway

Throughout this thesis, I often refer to ‘the public debates’. The way this term is used here is quite literal, as I use it to refer to debates that take place in the public, more specifically in online newspaper articles. The media plays an important part in making many debates public. Different media, such as TV, radio, newspapers, online forums and social media are used to distribute information and discuss important matters in society and allows the majority of the population to participate (Laberg, 2018). The Nordic countries have a high number of people who still read newspapers on a daily basis, showing high interest in keeping up with current events (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs and Moe, 2014). Due to rapid digitalization newspapers have also moved to digital platforms, posting articles online as well as on paper, and it has made it possible to access news and debates almost wherever you are and at any time. With the development of digital media, there has also been an increase in content written by the audience, for instance by linking the platform to social media where users can respond and comment on the material freely (ibid.). Several newspapers in Norway have also opened their platform to other writers than journalists, making it possible for others to contribute to the debates directly through the newspaper. An example is the column ‘Si;D’ in the newspaper

Aftenposten, where short commentaries and articles exclusively from children and youth between the ages 13 to 21 are published. Several of the articles in the data sample used in this thesis have been retrieved from this column.

The material subject to analysis in this thesis is online newspaper publications and articles written in the period between 2014 and 2017. The 35 articles were chosen because of their common theme; special needs education. The selection process and criteria are described further in chapter 4. These contributions to the debates are analyzed in order to identify the participants, perspectives, and themes that make up the public debates on special needs education. Diving into this material, it appears that while there are many different individuals, positions, and opinions, there are also many recognizable patterns. These will be described in chapters 5 and 6. All the articles are written in Norwegian, retrieved from Norwegian online newspapers and are all about the national educational system.

1.2 The inclusive school

The current public education system in Norway is known as the comprehensive, or inclusive school. It is based on principles of integration, community and equal opportunity for all. The compulsory 10-year primary education does not segregate students based on gender, social background, ethnicity, religion or ability, and all children can be enrolled at their local school the year they turn six years old. The Norwegian system is built on the idea that all children should have equal opportunity to the same education, and all public schools in Norway follow the same curriculum, currently ‘Kunnskapsløftet’ from 2006 (LK06) (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003). The cost of education is covered by the state, including the extra assistance received by the students that are considered to have ‘special educational needs’.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The main research question to be answered in this study is:

How is special needs education and the students who need it talked about in Norwegian newspapers, and do these students have voices of their own in this platform?

To answer this, more specific research questions were formulated:

- What are the main topics of concern in the public debates about special needs education?
- Who are present in the debates, and how are they represented?
- In what ways are children and youth with special needs talked about and included in the public debates?
- How does special needs education affect social and academic inclusion for the students?

1.4 Terms used in the thesis

The public debates: The collection of online newspaper articles that make out the debates about special needs education in Norway from 2014 to 2017.

Special educational needs: Using the definition of Ogden and Rygvold (2017), the term refers to children and young who have learning disabilities, developmental or physical impairments, social, emotional or behavioral difficulties or a combination of these that affect their education. It is not a criterion that they have diagnoses, but that they receive extra help in some form in school, based on a decision made by professionals.

Disability: The way this term is used is quite broad and is based on a notion of normality. It covers struggles with vision, hearing, learning, movement, mental illness, and developmental issues, and more.

Professionals: People who work in the field of education. Used as a broad term, this includes people who work with education, either theoretically, practically or administratively such as principals.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 will provide an overview of the development of the educational system in Norway. It will look at changes through time both in the general and special needs education, taking a look at the political and socioeconomic environment that have contributed to the changes and reforms.

Chapter 3 will provide the theoretical framework on which the thesis is built, exploring the perspectives from the social studies of children and childhood and social constructionism. It

will also present different concepts, including discourses, power relations, space/place, normality, and different models of disability.

In chapter 4, the methodological outline is presented, briefly explaining how the project started, changed and came through. It explains and describes the main methodological challenges, and the methods used to conduct the research including the process of coding and analysis.

The main chapters in this thesis are chapters 5 and 6, as they present the findings in the data sample. The focus in chapter 5 'Representation and perspectives' is describing the different roles and professions that are present in the debates, as well as the perspectives on disability and how they are used, and how the students themselves are presented and represented.

Moving to chapter 6 'Main themes', the themes and topics in the debates are accounted for in more detail. The four main concerns that are discussed in the articles will be presented and discussed, and the articles in the sample will be thematically connected and compared.

Chapter 7 features a discussion that combines the topics from chapters 5 and 6. The people contributing to the debate will be discussed in relation to the major themes in the debates. In addition, the discussion will connect this to the use of media, power relations and perspectives on disability. The research questions will be answered throughout the chapter, and the final chapter will provide a shorter summary where the findings are directly related to the questions.

Chapter 2:

Historical context

Many children in Norway are first introduced to an educational institution before the age of one when they start kindergarten. In August, the year the children turn six, they move on to primary school for ten years, before most of them move on to high school for another two or three years. This means that the educational system is a significant part of the lives of children and youth in Norway. In this chapter, I will look at some of the changes and developments that have made the educational system in Norway what it is today. While the focus of the thesis is special needs education, general education will also be included in this chapter in order to understand the educational system as a whole, and not as two separate systems. For some contextualizing, I will first shortly look at the international history and changes, before moving on to a brief overview of the educational history of Norway.

2.1 Integration as an international trend?

As we will see, the changes and reforms in educational systems are strongly connected to the discourses, politics and social environment in the general society of the time. While the social policy now promotes the ideals of integration, inclusion, and normalization, history shows that this has not always been the case, both in general and concerning education (Tøssebro, 2006; Buli-Holmberg and Ekeberg, 2016). Through history, there have been different ways of treating people with disabilities, not always fully including them in society. The same can be seen in the history of education. Special needs education has developed from diffuse measures and philosophical curiosity to special schools and institutionalization, before reaching the inclusive education that is the goal in Norway today (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004).

While earlier accounts of people with disabilities have been found, the number of texts slowly start to increase towards the 1800s, showing different approaches to the topic. Some approach the topic with care, love, and interest, while others show exclusion and categorization, giving the impression of ambivalence towards disability at the time (ibid.). The first schools for the deaf and the blind were established in Paris in 1770 and 1784 and were followed by similar schools across Europe. In addition, France was also the leading country in educating people

with mental illness and retardation. One of the pioneers behind this in France, Edward Seguin (1812-1880), continued his work in the USA where he became central in building the field of special needs education. He was later associated with what he called “The Christian school”, a philosophical direction founded with Christian values, emphasizing equality and free education for everyone, including the poor and the weak as well as the idea that anyone would be able to learn if the teacher is good enough (ibid.).

Another central figure in the field of special needs education was Heinrich Hanselmann (1882-1960). He was the first professor in this new field, and he focused on educating others in the discipline. When developing the field, he combined several other disciplines such as medicine, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, and emphasized that different methods should be used for different disabilities. Even though Hanselmann shared Seguin’s holistic approach to the student which meant physical, intellectual and moral education, their ideas of where the disabled child should be, were very different. Hanselmann was affected by the societal thinking of his time and emphasized an early institutionalization of children with special needs. He thought that there had been too much optimism surrounding the work with disabled children and their ability to learn, and this reflected the public debates that were starting to use terms such as eugenics, racial hygiene, and degeneration. During this time, moving towards the modern, civilized society was of importance, and degenerates were seen as a danger to this progress of society. In the educational debate, terms such as ‘not fit for education’ were also resurfacing and being used about children with special needs, and these terms continued to be a part of the debates well into the 1900s (ibid.).

While there are many more movements and individuals central to the international historical changes, these two, whom I have chosen to present here represent the significant changes in the international debates concerning special needs education.

2.1.1 Salamanca Statement

In June 1994, 92 governments and 25 international organizations were represented in Salamanca, Spain for a conference on the topic of education for all. The conference was organized by the Spanish government in co-operation with UNESCO and aimed to consider the fundamental policy shifts needed to promote an approach towards inclusive education. The outcome was the documents the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice

in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action that was adopted by the conference (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

2.1.2 *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*

When discussing international trends concerning children, especially in the western world, it is unavoidable to mention The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Dealing with rights that specifically concerns children, the convention was adopted and opened for signature in 1989 and came into force in 1990 after several nations ratified. Today, most countries in the world have ratified the convention, even though it has received criticism for treating childhood as something universal (UNCRC, 1989).

Several articles relate to children's education or disability. In article 2, it is, for example, stated that all children should be ensured the rights in the Convention without any discrimination, specifically mentioning disability. Article 23 speaks more specifically about disabled children and states that they should be able to enjoy a full life, ensuring and promoting dignity, self-reliance and active participation in society. It should also be ensured that they have sufficient access to education, preparation for employment and recreational activities to ensure the best possible social integration. Further, article 28 and 29 states that children's rights to education based on equal opportunity shall be recognized and free to all and emphasize "The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNCRC, article 29.1.a, 1989).

2.2 National Trend

2.2.1 *From the 1700s to World War II*

The history of Norway's primary education is long, as the precursor was founded in 1739, but it took over 100 years to make it a permanent, nation-wide institution. King Kristian VI created this early version, and the intention was to create a school for Christianity and literacy available to *everyone*. At this time there was already an awareness of the different learning opportunities of different children, and the content of the curriculum could be adapted to students that struggled. By law, some children could be sent to a 'House of Correction' ('tukthus') to complete their education if they were not able to do so at their local school. These were mostly children with behavioral issues, but children with general learning

disabilities could also be sent to such facilities. There were however some who were not seen as 'fit for education' as well, and they did not obtain the status of 'adult', either because they could not pass the rite of passage called 'confirmation' which was the goal of education at the time (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004).

When looking at the laws concerning education in schools that developed in the 1800s, it is clear that there is an increase in differentiation in the educational system. Until 1960 the educational policy was holding on to the goal of a school for everyone, but this compulsory education and the ideal of the inclusive school posed dilemmas for the government. In a law from 1860 called 'the country school law' ('landsskoleloven'), one paragraph stated that individual children could in particular circumstances, be exempted from some classes or school altogether (ibid.). It was now stated by law that not all children belonged in ordinary education. In 1881, the 'abnormal' children were covered under 'the abnormschool-law' ('Abnormskoleloven'), a law that stated that education was a right for everyone, including children with various problems and disabilities. 'Abnormschools' were then built for the different disabilities, for example, schools for the blind and the deaf. These schools were not necessarily built locally, and the children attending these schools would move to and live at the institutions (ibid.).

The first laws concerning compulsory primary education ('folkeskolen') for seven years emerged in 1889 and stated that children who could not follow the education due to disability, illness or behavioral problems would not attend the ordinary school. This education would only be for the children who were able to follow the courses that were provided without adapting to the individual students. At this time, there had long been a debate concerning separate education for students with special needs, and now categorizations of children were included in the educational law (ibid.). In 1915 'Abnormskoleloven' was replaced by the 'Law on deaf, blind and retarded children's education'¹ that would (with some changes) be in place until 1951 (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). Doctors were now appointed with the task of deciding whether a child would receive education or not. At this time many Norwegian scientists were a part of the international scientific field that had an interest in eugenics and racial hygiene. Within these theories many types of disabilities were now seen as hereditary, leading to the sterilization of many disabled individuals 'for the good of the society'. While this might not have been the general thought in society, it was, in general, a time for

¹ Lov om døvne, blinde og åndssvake barns undervisning og om pleie-og arbeidshjem for ikke dannelsedyktige åndssvake.

pessimism surrounding the abilities of the disabled, which was also reflected in educational laws and policies (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004). In 1936, a change in the law was made, and school administrators were allowed to give special instruction to children with speech impairments and reading and writing difficulties (Dalen and Ogden, 2017).

2.2.2 After World War II

After World War II, the Norwegian educational system has been through many reforms. The idea of segregation was still strong and highly naturalized in special needs education, and in 1951 a law about special schools was implemented. The argument was that the educational system was poorly equipped to take care of students with disabilities (Buli-Holmberg, 2016; Dalen and Ogden, 2017). This law that lasted until 1976 stated that it was the responsibility of the state to ensure that children with special needs were offered education. This was in contrast to the system as it was, where the special schools were mainly very secluded from the rest of the educational institutions and had minimal contact with the outside environment (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). To fulfill this new responsibility many special schools were built, most often one for each category of difficulties, where the children lived at school. Even though there were schools for the blind, the deaf, children with behavioral problems and general learning difficulties, many children from the category 'not fit for education' were still not offered any education (Buli-Holmberg and Ekeberg, 2016; Dalen and Ogden, 2017). During the 1950s a new addition to the educational law also introduced special needs classes and extra education in the local schools. Through this, more children received extra help at their local schools. It did not, however, result in the return of the children that were already living away from home in the special schools. Later, during the same years, more local special schools were established, allowing more children to live at home while receiving this education (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004, Buli-Holmberg and Ekeberg, 2016). However, the political and educational commitment towards disabled students was lacking, it is argued, and many of the buildings used and built for special needs education were provisional and poorly suited for this purpose (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). Even though the facilities were less than optimal, many more students were now provided with facilitated education. Groven (2013) states that the number of students attending special needs education in their local environment, either in separate schools or in 'help-classes' grew from approximately 4000 at the beginning of the 1950s, to between 19 000 and 20 000 at the end of the decade.

Ideas about integration and normalization reached Scandinavia in the 1960s, changing the public and professional debate, and there was a growing concern and focus on the vulnerable groups in society. Many protested against a lack of humanity and called for social equalization (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003; Askildt and Johnsen, 2004; Groven, 2013). Even though it was discovered early in the 1900s that punishment and abuse was common at several special needs facilities, it was not until the 1960s that the critique of these conditions became a part of the political agenda. The concept of normalization and decentralization became prevalent, and the municipalities were given the responsibility of caring for individuals with disabilities close to their homes (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004). As the debate on integration and decentralization reached education the political will to build slowed. It was now debated whether the economic focus should be on educating teachers or on improving the facilities (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). During governmental budgetary procedures in 1968, it was decided that the goal was to incorporate the special needs education into the general education and that the two should be coordinated (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003). As part of improving the Norwegian welfare state, principles of normalization, integration and individually adapted teaching became central in the educational system. The educational law concerning primary education was in 1969 altered and now stated that *all students* were entitled to education based on the abilities they had, and nine years of compulsory primary education was now established (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004; Groven, 2013). Norway also became one of the leading countries in educating teachers for special needs education during the 1960s, developing a four-year study in Oslo that built on the teachers' education. Later, this type of courses was available at different institutions of higher education all over the country (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004).

The focus in the 1970s was furthering integration and decentralization and making sure that as many children as possible were able to live at home and attend school locally. Extra lessons could also be given at home, at hospitals and other institutions for the students who needed it (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). This made sure that students who were not able to physically go to school would still receive education and not fall too far behind. At the end of the decade, it was implemented in the law that offers in special needs education should be available to all children during the ages they would attend school (ibid.). The decentralization also affected other areas in Norwegian society at this time. The growth in public services had given issues with capacity and complexity, and many tasks were transferred from central to local bodies giving them more power (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003). By the beginning of the 1980s

integration was an established goal in special needs education and the focus moved on towards the normalization of disabled people's lives and existence. However, the economic, social and cultural situation affected the special needs education, and the economy restricted the possible measures in this part of the educational system. The economic growth and use of resources of the previous two decades slowed as the municipal economy weakened. This led to difficulties in fulfilling the goals and expectations that were set, and the cost of special needs education continued to grow (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). Even though the municipalities and counties had been given more power, the central government maintained a level of power, especially in terms of economy. Grants from the government were often earmarked specific purposes and could not always be used freely where the local politicians and school administrations thought they were needed (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003).

2.2.3 From the reforms of the 1990s

The 1990s were characterized by massive change and restructuring and a strong political will to strengthen the special needs education (Dalen and Ogden, 2017; Askildt and Johnsen, 2004). The reforms changed among other things the content and organization of the entire Norwegian educational system and furthered the ideals of inclusion, equality, normalization and lifelong learning from the previous decades (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). The decentralization was furthered, and the local authorities were given even more freedom and responsibility to find optimal strategies to reach educational goals set by the government. In addition, the specifically earmarked financial grants were to a certain degree replaced with grants that could be used more freely (Telhaug and Mediås, 2003). In 1997 the ten-year-long compulsory education that we have today was implemented, and the age was lowered again so that children would start school the year they turned six instead of seven. The right to high school education for all was also established (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). In 1992 the decentralization was furthered by the closing of special schools run by the state and establishing special needs competence centers that would be an addition and help to the schools locally. The educational law of 1998 once again stated that education should be adapted to the individual student and included that individual teaching plans should be developed for special needs students (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004).

During the early 2000s, the quality of education became part of the agenda as one of the main political concerns. A political suggestion of removing the special needs education in favor of

adapting the general education to fit all students was presented. This proposal was controversial and caused much debate, showing a strong resistance from the interest organizations for disabled people, among others. They were firmly against removing the right to special needs education, even though there was an agreement on the positive effect of strengthening the adapted teaching in general education. When the final proposal came out, the government had taken this into consideration, and rather than moving to dissolve the special needs education, the goal was to decrease the need for it by focusing on adapted teaching (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). One of the ‘catchphrases’ for the educational reform of 2006 became ‘tidlig innsats for livslang læring’ which translates to “early efforts for lifelong learning”. This emphasizes the identification of special needs and adapting the education at an early stage (ibid.). However, in 2012, six years after the reform was first launched, the government found that there had been few positive effects. Reports showed that contrary to the goal, there had been an increase in the use of special needs education both in classes and in segregated teaching. They also found that the emphasis on ‘early efforts’ had not been implemented as intended. It was reported that many thought the documents of the reform were too open to interpretation, and many local schools and administrations were insecure about the goals, efforts, and principles they were to implement (ibid.).²

In 2014 an expert group appointed by the Norwegian research council presented a report concerning the state of special needs education. They made a distinction between special needs education as a field and as a right throughout education. They found that schools were not good enough at using the competence within the field, and many of the teachers who were educated within it were not used for special needs education. Often, assistants and teachers without this specialized education were used instead (Ekspertgruppen, 2014). In 2015 another report was published, focusing on the psychosocial environment in schools. It suggested that the principles stated in the UNCRC and inclusion should be an integral part of the curriculum. It also suggested a new governmental commitment towards the inclusive school with a more precise plan for its implementation. It was also emphasized that the building of capacity could not be universal for all schools and that it would be adapted to the different schools (NOU 2015:2).

² This serves as one possible explanation to why there were few positive effects after the reform was implemented. A discussion of the many possible factors affecting this will not be included here.

2.3 Summary

The Norwegian educational system was established from an idea shared by many other countries in the 1800 and 1900s. While the main focus was that most children were able to learn, there were still children who were seen as ‘not fit for education’. As time went on, so did the dominating ideas surrounding special needs education, and as the expectations grew for educating the population, segregated institutionalization became the solution. When the socioeconomic conditions in Norway increased, and people were engaging more in activism and the rights of minorities, it was called for a more inclusive educational system. ‘Special needs children’ were offered education closer to home, but the conditions were not necessarily adequate, and from the 1990s they were being included in the same facilities as other students without special needs. The ideal was the inclusive school, where all students would be taught by teachers and specialists in special needs within the same classroom, adapting the teaching to the individual students.

The term ‘not fit for education’ was discarded in the middle of the 1900s as it was established by law that *all* children were entitled to education based on their abilities. With inclusive schools on the political agenda, further education was offered to teachers to be able to adapt to the individual needs and complex problems of the children, but throughout the reforms, this ideal did not seem to be met and fulfilled for all. Many special needs students were still taught individually or in small groups outside the classroom, and the law still allows individuals to be exempt from attending school altogether after being evaluated by experts and professionals, and if the parents agree. This happens rarely, and only if it is considered to be what is often mentioned as being ‘in the best interest of the child’ (Dalen and Ogden, 2017).

Having given a brief overview of the educational history specifically related to special needs education in Norway, the next chapter will present the theoretical foundation for the thesis. It will present theoretical perspectives from the social studies of children and childhood and disability studies, and theoretical concepts such as discourse and normality. This will give an account of how disability can be conceptualized in society.

Chapter 3:

Theory

This study aims to explore the public debate surrounding special needs education, its participants and their different views. In this chapter, I will present the theoretical foundation for the analysis and discussion. The perspectives are mainly based on concepts from the social studies of children and childhood and disability studies. I will primarily use the perspective of social constructionism, a perspective that views knowledge and meaning as constructed through social relations rather than within individuals. I have also presented other perspectives that challenge this view, and that are present in the data. Further, I have elaborated on what a discourse is, and included concepts such as power relations and the construction of space/place before I elaborate on the term normality. Finally, I describe three common ways of understanding disability in the Nordic countries, for both professionals and the general public.

3.1 The social studies of children and childhood

The social studies of children and childhood emerged as a tradition in the social sciences during the 1980s and 1990s. As an interdisciplinary approach to the study of children and childhood, it aims to study children as experts in their own lives, giving room to their perspectives and voices in research. Children are viewed as active participants in their social lives, as well as in the construction of it, the lives of others and the society they live in (Prout and James, 1990; Alanen, 2001). This paradigm is in many ways seen as a reaction to the way children previously were researched within disciplines such as sociology and psychology, and the way children were presented and represented in research. They were present but, like women, they were muted (Prout and James, 1990).

3.1.1 Childhood as a social construction

Childhood has been conceptualized in diverse ways through time, even though it was previously given little attention. Montgomery (2003) describes three dominant conceptualizations that have prevailed in the western world. The first is the *Puritan discourse*, where the belief is that all humans are born sinful and that children are evil and in need of

enlightening through education and discipline. Later, the *'tabula rasa'* discourse see children as a blank slate with potential, also in need of adult guidance through education to become a responsible citizen. The third is the *Romantic discourse*, seeing childhood as a time of innocence and children in need of protection from the adult world. Further, in researching children, the concept of 'development' has been central. These developmental approaches emphasized children as irrational and natural, and childhood as universal (Prout and James, 1990). Children were seen as passive recipients of information, and later the concept of socialization would explain how children gradually gain knowledge about social roles and become active adults instead of passive children. Children were seen as children in that they were different from adults, or rather, lacking and gradually gaining adult attributes (Nilsen, 2009; Prout and James, 1990).

Within the social studies of children and childhood, there are several perspectives on how to understand and theorize children and childhood. One of them is called the *deconstructive sociology of childhood* by Alanen (2001), and views childhood as socially constructed. Childhood is in this perspective not seen as universal or static but shaped by discourses situated in time and place. What it means to be a child will be different in different cultures and societies, and it will change over time (Prout and James, 1990; Jenks, 1982; Alanen, 2001). Prout and James (1990) also remind us that children take part in the construction and reconstruction of childhood by stating that it is constructed both for and by children. Children adapt to their environment as it changes, but the expectations of adults also shape childhood. Montgomery concludes appropriately:

“To talk about one childhood is impossible as the ways in which children experience it and adults view it vary depending on their own background and expectations. Nevertheless we can talk about the discourses surrounding childhood and look at how these have both shaped and changed and been shaped and changed by the cultural setting.” (Montgomery, 2003:73)

3.2 What is a discourse?

Within the social sciences, there is usually not just one way of understanding something. The different sets of beliefs about a topic or phenomenon, such as childhood or disability, are often called discourses (Montgomery, 2003). Neumann (2001) draws upon many different authors in trying to define the term, and while he states that definitions will change with time and space, he presents his definition. He says that a discourse is a system that provides a set of

statements and practices that construct reality expressed either orally or with text.

Montgomery (2003) explains further that a discourse is a set of interconnected ideas held together by a particular perspective, ideology or worldview. Each discourse draws upon a specific knowledge-base and set of assumptions in explaining how a phenomenon works, or sometimes how they should work. This means that the ways people make sense of the world are based on their position in the world, for example socially and culturally. Discourses are thus rooted in historical, social and political contexts, and both reflect and create reality, as can be seen in the models of disability described below.

The different discourses about childhood produce ways of understanding children, which in turn affects the way they are treated. This is also the case when discussing disability and special needs education. It is then necessary to remember that in addition to the fact that discourses are changing over time, different discourses about the same topic exist at the same time, and often challenge each other (Montgomery, 2003). This phenomenon will be shown in the analysis, as I will not look at only one discourse about children, youth, childhood, and disability. I will look at the different discourses that are present in the debate, and thus show how they co-exist and interact and challenge each other in public space.

3.3 Power relations

Power is a concept that can be difficult to define. It has no materiality and is invisible, and it does not have a constant form, but it still has physical and social consequences. Like most other things, there are also many different conceptualizations of power. Some divide the conceptualizations into two main groups, the first seeing power as a possession of a group, person or institution, and the second theorize power as relational, unable to operate independently (Punch, Bell, Costello and Panelli, 2007).

When understanding power as an object, it is thought that power is held by the powerful and utilized on those who have less power, for example in the relation adult/child. It can be both on an individual level and broader social and institutional levels, but the commonality is that adults control the lived experiences of children and youth. This conceptualization is relatively easy to understand, and both the powerful and less powerful are easy to identify (ibid.).

However, when we think of power as relational, we see it as social and relational phenomena and give room for understanding the negotiations that occur between actors. With this

perspective, power is not materialized or seen as ‘property’ and cannot be bought or held as such. Power is not held by individuals but can be used by them. “For example, power embedded in adulthood does not give individual agents (i.e., adults) definable power, but the capacity to harness the privilege that operates around adulthood.” (Punch et.al, 2007:207). In this understanding of power, discourses provide a link between language and the production of meaning because knowledge and power go hand in hand. Discourses have the power to both give a voice to and to silence groups of people, for example, youth, children and disabled people. It is also important to remember that even though children and disabled people are often considered powerless, they are not. Groups or individuals exercise power in their own ways, developing power within groups and with others in the same situation to gain power over something. There are also many ways children, youth and disabled people can negotiate their lives and as such exercise their power (Punch et al. 2007).

Adults usually have power over children and young people; they create discourses about children both with and without their views included. These discourses can impact children directly or indirectly in their everyday lives. Adults have the power to make decisions about what children should do and where they should be. Even though the argument often is that children are in need of protection, sometimes adults of different roles act more or less as ‘gatekeepers’, in a way keeping children away from the debates.

3.4 Space/place

‘Space’ and ‘place’ are terms that are used often while discussing children’s lives. However, they are abstract terms whose meaning are often taken for granted (Clark, 2013; Massey, 2005). Clark and Gallacher (2013) state that while the terms often seem to merge in everyday use, they are distinguished by thinking of ‘space’ as more abstract than ‘place’. To explain further, they say that space can be seen as a surface on which several places can be created. Space can be seen as something social rather than a location, while place is a space given meaning and identity in its own right. Massey (2005) recognizes space as relational and always under construction. Because space is created through social relations and practices, they can never be finished and will continue to develop and change.

Within human geography, the branch of children’s geography has drawn much inspiration from the social studies of children and childhood, emphasizing that children are competent social actors that participate in the construction in their own lives. This way of thinking about

children is transferred to geography, in that space and place does not only affect childhood, but childhood makes a difference to the spaces and places in which they live (Gallagher, 2006).

Even though children and youth are seen as active co-creators of space in literature, it is also shown that they are often excluded from and marginalized in these processes due to factors such as age, gender, race, and disabilities. Seeing that space is created from relations, it is essential to remember that children are often in a subordinate relation to adults (ibid.). So while all people are subject to spatial limitations and prohibitions, children and youth seem to have more restrictions than adults, especially if they are not accompanied by one. They can easily be seen as 'out of place' (Clark and Gallacher, 2013). Spaces are often understood as 'adult' by default. Because children are often seen as vulnerable, adult fears and perceived dangers will put restrictions on children and their movements. Clark and Gallacher (2013) note that this is particularly so in 'public spaces', which should be open to the entire public. The threat of strangers, traffic and other dangers cause parents and other adults to encourage activities in more protected spaces. On the other hand, children and maybe particularly youth can be seen as the 'threat' in the space they are in. They are often subject to stereotyping by the adults, for example as a group of teenagers are accused of causing trouble when they are at a mall, but not shopping.

One of the strategies for dealing with these issues and to restricting activity is to create 'child- and youth-specific' spaces. Examples of these spaces are playgrounds and skate-parks. Here we have the distinction between the terms 'children's places' and 'places for children'. The places that are made by adults for children, often represent adult ideas of what childhood is and what it should be and is 'places for children'. 'Children's places' are places children create for themselves, adapting their environment (ibid.). Even though children spend a considerable amount of time in school, this institution is also in a sense such a 'place for children'. A school is a place created by adults, that represent an idea of what childhood is; a time of learning. The school is considered the appropriate place for children and youth to develop. However, spatiality is also relevant within schools. It is easy to see the different spaces that are created for different activities, for example, the schools' gymnasium which can be used for many other activities besides physical exercise. It can be used for assemblies, entertainment and as polling stations in elections (Gallagher, 2006).

When it comes to special needs education, it is also possible to see this tendency. While there are various ways of receiving special needs education within and outside of the general

classroom, the classroom can become a space with different meanings. Specific rooms can be ascribed meaning depending on what they are used for and when they are used. Experiences from research with children in school show that inviting children into rooms with an ascribed meaning to participate in the research, such as a 'naughty room', can affect the participation and even possibly the outcome of the research. Children can be reluctant to enter rooms, or eager to finish the tasks and return to another room (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). In such a way, a classroom (or other room) can obtain a negative connotation from the children as well as a specific meaning given by adults.

3.5 Normality

According to Davis, normality is a prevailing concept in people's everyday lives:

"What does not occur to many people is that disability is not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances." (Davis, 1995:2)

We compare ourselves to others and decide what is normal based on our opinion of the average human being. Normality imposes homogeneity, but at the same time, it makes individualization possible, creating limitations for the tolerance of difference and keeps watch over individuals that are outside the norm. This means that the concepts of normality and abnormality are interdependent and that disability is a part of the same system (Caputo and Yuont, 1993; Davis, 1995). Lundeby (2008) argues further that the different approaches to understanding disability (elaborated below) is based on different discourses surrounding the concept of normalcy.

The prevailing reform concerning people with disabilities in Norway is built on the principle of normalization. The reform is called 'ansvarsreformen', translated to 'the responsibility reform', and came as a reaction to the previous way disabled people were treated in Norway. The normalization principle the reform is built on was developed during the 1960s and '70s in Sweden, and later in the US (Rønbeck, 2014). Nirje (1992, in Rønbeck 2014) argues that to follow this principle is to ensure that the prevailing norms for the general population also apply for people with disabilities. This means that disabled people should have the same opportunities to live their lives, develop, and have a similar everyday life as the non-disabled population.

The normalization principle has however also received some criticism. Even though normalization and inclusion still are central principles in Norwegian politics, the terms have become somewhat negatively loaded (Rønbeck, 2014). Normalization requires the existence of a norm, and as explored above, normalcy and abnormality are interdependent. One of the main questions has been whether ‘the normal life’ is the same as ‘the good life’ (Askheim, 2003 in Rønbeck, 2014).

3.6 Models of disability

To be able to understand the public debate about special needs education in Norway, we also need to explore some of the diverse ways disabilities and impairments are understood within the discourse on disability. There are several other models than the ones that are presented here, but the particular discourses are chosen because they are most common in the Nordic countries and most relevant for this study as will be shown in chapters 5 and 6 (Tøssebro, 2010). It is also important to note that when I use the term ‘disability’ in this study, I am referring to a wide range of challenges. They can be physical or psychological, visible or invisible, but they all affect children and youths’ experiences in the educational system and are all affected by the perspectives that are mentioned here.

3.6.1 Individual tragedy model

The individual tragedy model, also known as the medical model, is a dominant conceptualization of disability in western societies and is often used as common sense by both individuals with and without disabilities (Holt, 2004). Within this perspective, disability is an abnormality, a long-lasting injury or problem within the mind or body that prohibits the individual from fully participating in society. It is often the belief that medical attention or intervention is necessary for curing or minimizing the problem. This model emphasizes that it is the disability itself that cause the issues the individual is facing, an assumption that has been much criticized (Holt, 2004; Lundebj, 2008; Martin, 2018).

When it comes to education, Holt (2004) argues that the focus on individual learning has strong parallels to the individual tragedy model. The test-oriented approach in the educational system enables teachers and other professionals to categorize students and their abilities based on age-specific expectations and norms. If a student does not reach the expected level of

competence and development, he or she might be subject to intervention through special needs education. The problem is thus seen to be exclusively connected to the individual, not the educational system or other social structures.

3.6.2 *Social model of disability*

As an opposition to the individual tragedy models, social models were developed (Holt, 2004). They criticized the individual tragedy model for seeing disability as a problem solely within individuals and not seeing how society construct barriers around them. Shakespeare and Watson (1998:14) describe the model by stating that “this approach defines disability as the social restriction placed on people with impairment by society. People are disabled by discrimination and prejudice, not by their bodies.”. The social model separates impairment from disability, whereas the impairment is the personal injury, and the disability is the way society discriminate and suppress the person with an impairment, arguing that society is built without consideration to the variations of the members (Lundeby, 2008; Tøssebro, 2010).

In an educational setting, this perspective will mean that it is not the dyslectic child that is to blame for him or her not achieving the reading skills that are expected for the age, but the educational system and society for not being able to accommodate him or her. By providing the child special needs education and to his or her individual needs, the child will no longer be discriminated. The child will then have access to gaining the same knowledge and skills as all the other children in the school.

3.6.3 *Constructionist model of disability*

This model is known by many other names but is most often referred to as the constructionist relational, or poststructuralist model or perspective. But as Gustavsson and Tøssebro (2005) state further, the name does not matter as much as the idea it supports. Within this model, disability is understood as the result of social, linguistic, discursive and cultural constructions, rather than something caused by the individual *or* created by society. Disability is constructed in the relation between the individual and its surroundings, or between different individuals (Gustavsson and Tøssebro, 2005; Lundeby, 2008). According to Martin (2018), this means that the activity of an individual considered to be disabled can be restricted by *social reasons* such as discrimination, *environments* such as a lack of wheelchair ramps, and the *impairment*

itself. In a way, the relational model combines the individual tragedy model and the social model by emphasizing that both the personal experiences and impairments and the society and its reactions are essential to understand disability.

This way of understanding disability was not introduced to the Nordic countries through social science but is rather linked to the development of policies in the 1960s and 70s as an alternative to the previous notions of disability. However, the view did not replace the other perspectives, and the individual tragedy model especially is still prevailing in Nordic societies (Gustavsson and Tøssebro, 2005).

The different discourses will affect the lives of disabled youth and children in various ways. As I wrote earlier, discourses construct reality and thus become very real for the groups they affect, and they will be affected both on an individual and an institutional level. Because the different discourses co-exist, people might have experiences with several of them in different contexts. The way children and youth with disabilities are treated may then vary depending on whether they are at home, at school, with friends or other adults, or perhaps in a hospital or with other professionals. All of these concepts, terms, and discourses are therefore important when I will try to analyze the public debate concerning the special needs education in Norway. We need to understand how all these theoretical components fit or not fit together as they constitute the lived experiences of children and youth with special educational needs.

Chapter 4:

Method

My study is designed to explore the public debate about special needs education in Norway and the topics, participants and arguments in it. The method that has been used is document analysis, and it was done on sources chosen from several Norwegian online newspapers that constitute the debate on special needs education. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the importance of methodology, provide a short summary of my initial research design and how it changed before moving on to document analysis a method. I will elaborate on why this method was chosen before describing the research design and present the data selection along with the selection criteria. Finally, I will describe my process of coding and analysis before discussing some limitations and challenges with the research, followed by some ethical reflections.

4.1 Methodology

While *method* refers to the specific techniques that are used to collect and analyze data, and report on the results, *methodology* is a broader term that relates to the understanding of the research process (Neuman, 2011). It is the theoretical framework researchers use to determine how to gain knowledge, and the best methods to do it to answer the research questions. Because methods are linked to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher, and research data are always collected in relation to something, methods are not neutral tools (Bryman, 2008). It is important for the researcher to be aware of and reflexive about the underlying assumptions in the research.

Epistemology is the theory of how we gain knowledge, and the epistemological position behind this research is an interpretive approach. In this approach, the researcher aims to interpret the subjective meanings of social actions to understand a reality. It concerns interactions between people and is, in general, a systematic analysis of socially meaningful actions (Bryman, 2008; Neuman, 2011). *Ontology* concerns how we understand reality and what exists, and in this thesis, the ontological perspective is, as mentioned earlier, based on social constructionism. Within constructionism, it is believed that there is no single reality,

but rather that reality is constructed through social interactions (Bryman, 2008). The interpretation of constructionism in this study does not imply that there is no truth, but that truth is not static. Knowledge and meaning is not universal and will differ between cultures and change over time.

4.1.1 *Researchers pre-position*

While some argue that social science should be as unbiased and objective as the natural sciences claim to be, others argue that this is impossible (Neuman, 2011). Because of this, the pre-position of the researcher is a relevant aspect to consider. I am from Norway and thus familiar with the cultural context of the study and the data material. I have also briefly worked within the educational system as a substitute, and even though I did not work specifically with special needs education, I was working with a group that included children considered to have special educational needs. Because people are shaped by their social locations and experiences (ibid.), these aspects may cause me not to have the same critical distance from the study as another researcher might have. Being aware of these aspects, I will try to be as transparent as possible in the methods used to analyze the data material.

4.2 **Initial research**

While the topic of interest for this study has always been children and youth in special needs education, my initial research plan did not entail doing a document analysis. Initially, the study was designed to explore the experiences of youth with special educational needs in the Norwegian inclusive school policy. The focus would be on the different ways the students are included and excluded both academically and socially in a school setting. The research questions were asked in such a way that the methods would be participatory observation, informal interviews, focus group discussions. I was also prepared to use adapted methods, such as drawing, photography, and diaries to meet the wishes and needs of the potential participants.

While I was warned by professors and literature that

“It is not always easy to make contact with children to find out about their lives and opinions. Parents and teachers may refuse access to children, and it is particularly difficult to reach children in institutional care.” (Ennew et.al., 2009)

I did not anticipate that it would be as difficult as it was to gain access to educational institutions. I spent several months trying to make contact and an agreement with at least one school without luck. While still waiting for responses from the schools that I had contacted, I also initiated contact with various interest organizations that might be able to help get me in contact with my target group. Some were helpful by sending the information letter to their members, but after an amount of time had passed and only one parent had expressed interest, a decision was made to change the research questions and thus the methodology.

The final research project and research questions were developed as close to the original idea as possible. The project was then changed to concern the public debate about special needs education and its participants and arguments, and the process will be described below.

4.3 Document analysis as a method

Document analysis, also known as content analysis is a method that is often used in qualitative research. Like other methods, it requires examination and interpretation of data to gain understanding, insight, and meaning of different phenomena. The difference between this and other methods that are often used in qualitative research is that the data is not produced by participants or informants *for* the study. Document analysis makes use of documents and images that have been produced without the researcher's intervention and are often not intended to be analyzed by a researcher at all (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2013). The documents used in the analysis can have a variety of forms, such as official records, minutes of meetings, letters, books and journals, newspapers, advertisements, reports, and public records. What they have in common is that they in a general sense are written texts, either digital, printed or handwritten (Bowen, 2009; Rose and Grosvenor, 2001).

When using this method, the researcher needs to find and select the documents, make sense of them and synthesize the data to gain understanding and insight. To make sense of the documents, they need to be subjected to a systematic examination and interpretation. The data is often organized into major themes and categories through the use of coding (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2009). When document analysis is used in qualitative research the entire process of the document is relevant. The process starts as the document is created, also considering the intentions of the writer, and moves through reception by the various 'consumers' and finally situates the document in a social context (Neuman, 2011). I will elaborate on the ways in which I did the analyses of this study further down.

4.3.1 *Reasons for choice of method*

There are several reasons why I chose to do document analysis after I was unable to proceed with my first choice of study design. I could have changed my research questions in such a way that access would be less of a problem, for example by interviewing teachers and other pedagogical staff in schools, or changing the target group of children to a less protected group such as older students or students that are not considered to have special educational needs. However, I wanted the topic of my study to continue to be children and youth with special educational needs and disabilities. I also considered the time restraints that were becoming an issue, acknowledging that potentially finding a new group of informants and gaining access to them could possibly be more time consuming than what was realistic within the time limit I had available.

In order to stay within the topic of special needs education, document analysis was a good option for research. While time was a concern, this method allowed me to only have to consider my own time schedule, not the different schedules of participants. Throughout the phase of developing interview guides and preparing different methods for research, I had paid attention to the debates about public education in the media. Therefore, I chose to do a document analysis of newspaper articles concerning special needs education in Norway.

4.4 **Research design**

The design of this study is what Krippendorff (2013) calls ‘problem-driven content analysis’. In this type of analysis, texts are believed to provide answers to questions about something that is currently unknown or inaccessible. Researchers use a systematic reading of available texts and other data to get to know something that they deem significant by asking research questions (ibid.). The research questions in this study concern the topics, participants and representations in the public debate about special needs education, namely the newspaper articles that make up the data selection.

In analyzing the documents for this study, a hermeneutical approach was also adopted. Hermeneutics is defined as “a method associated with interpretative social science that originates in religious and literary studies of textual material in which in-depth inquiry into text and relating its parts to the whole can reveal deeper meanings.” (Neuman, 2011:101). The

idea behind hermeneutics is that the analyst must try to bring out the meanings of the text from the authors perspective through close, detailed reading. To do this, the analyst must pay close attention to the social and historical context the text was written within (Neuman, 2011; Bryman, 2008). Another aspect of the hermeneutic approach that is especially important for this study is that the analyst should get a deep understanding of how each of the parts of the text relates to the whole (Neuman, 2011). This is important because many of the texts included in the sample include sections from several different people that comment on one or more specific cases.

4.4.1 *Translation*

Before continuing, I would like to explicitly state that in this thesis all translations are done by me as the sample is entirely in Norwegian. Efforts have been made to stay as true to the original meaning of the text as possible so that as little as possible has been lost in translation. Where some words or phrases have been deemed too difficult to translate, there will be footnotes with short explanations of the meaning of the word.

4.5 **Data selection**

The primary sources in this study are documents, specifically newspaper articles from Norwegian online newspapers. The documents that have been selected for this study are all concerned with special needs education, either as an over-arching theme or as a topic of interest. The documents were selected using both *relevance sampling* and *snowball sampling*. Relevance sampling or purposive sampling usually aims to select all the documents that can contribute to answering the research questions, making the sample defined by them. When using relevance sampling, it is also essential that the researcher examines the texts that are to be analyzed to make sure that they are relevant to the study. Snowball sampling is a technique where the researcher starts with a unit of samples and applies a set of criteria, which produce additional samples. This may be done by going through the reference list of a relevant article to see if there are other useful documents. This method naturally terminates at some point, when there are no more references to follow (Krippendorff, 2013).

The way the two sampling methods were combined for this study was that I would start by searching for relevant keywords online, such as special needs education, inclusive school,

special needs, special schools³, and open the different newspaper articles that appeared in the search. I proceeded to superficially read through them to determine whether they would be useful or not to the study. The useful articles were saved, along with the ones I was uncertain about so that I could determine the relevance at a later stage. What I often found was that in many newspapers there were links in the articles that led to suggested readings about the same topics. I used this as snowball sampling as well. However, the articles mainly linked to other articles written by the same newspaper, causing me to repeat the process with other newspapers individually. Sometimes, the articles would also have references to articles in another newspaper, leading me to investigate further. The combination of the two sampling methods proved to be very useful and an efficient way to get an overview of the documents relevant for the sample.

4.5.1 *Selection criteria*

Some criteria were applied to the sample that was found to lower the number of units (Krippendorff, 2013). First, the sample was limited to only contain samples from 2014 to 2017. I decided that anything published later than 2017 would be excluded as well, to ensure that I did not continue to include new samples during the analysis process. Next, I decided that the sample would exclude articles published in journals for relevant professions. It was specified that the study would be about not just the debate, but the *public* debate about special needs education. This would entail that the documents should be easily accessible to the public, and for example not in journals aimed at specific professions. Because of the same reason, local newspapers were also excluded, making the focus be on national newspapers reaching the majority or a large part of the Norwegian population.

Another issue that has been considered here is that of access through payment. Many or most Norwegian online newspapers have arrangements where readers need to pay a monthly fee to gain access to their full online content. Many of the articles that were deemed relevant to this study are behind these so-called ‘payment walls’, and it was briefly considered to exclude these from the sample using payment as a selection criterion. However, when comparing the sample with and without these documents, it was clear that excluding them would result in an incomplete data selection, and the value and validity of the study would be compromised. The documents were included to be able to conduct an analysis of the public debate that is as

³ All words were searched for in Norwegian and are translated in this text.

holistic as possible, in line with the characteristics of relevance sampling mentioned above, where the aim is to include all relevant documents in the sample (Krippendorff, 2013). It is worth noting that the online newspaper that many of the articles comes from, Aftenposten, provide a limited amount of articles the reader can access for free per week. This makes many of the articles the reader usually would have to pay for accessible without a subscription.

4.5.2 Document sources

The documents included in this study were retrieved from several different online newspapers. However, the majority of them are from the paper called Aftenposten. The rest are published in VG, Dagbladet, Adresseavisen, Morgenbladet, and NRK⁴. The reason for this is that they had the most articles published within the relevant themes of this study. Because the documents are newspaper articles, there are naturally many different writers in addition to the many people that are interviewed and have commented on the cases in the articles. An account of the different writers and commentators will not be given here, as it is described in chapter 5.

4.5.3 Overview of documents

Following is an overview of the articles that are included in the sample. The original Norwegian title is included along with a translation of the title, the publishing date and the name of the newspaper where it is published. I have chosen not to include dates for updates on the articles that have this, but usually, the updates have been made the day after publishing. Some of the titles have been difficult to translate in a way that captures the original meaning, but efforts have been made to be as close to the original message as possible.

Original title	Translated title	Published
- Det er skolesystemet det er noe galt med, ikke elevene	- There is something wrong with the educational system, not the pupils	10.02.2014 Aftenposten

⁴ NRK – Norsk rikskringkasting, in English: Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. NRK is a government-owned public broadcasting company, that in addition to radio and television also provide news on digital platforms, including journalistic articles.

- De ringer politiet hvis sønnen min kommer på skolen	- They will call the police if my son comes to school	21.11.2014 NRK
Utestengt elev tilbake til skolen	Excluded pupil back to school	03.01.2015 NRK
Likhetens tyranni	The tyranny of similarity	16.06.2015 VG
Folk spør ikkje. Folk syns.	People don't ask. They assume.	18.06.2015 Dagbladet
Hold kjeft! Du vet ingenting om livet!	Shut up! You don't know anything about life!	24.07.2015 Morgenbladet
Verda er ikkje perfekt	The world is not perfect	14.08.2015 Morgenbladet
Skolekorpset reddet meg	The school band saved me	28.08.2015 Aftenposten
- Dysleksi er et handikapp som ingen ser	- Dyslexia as a handicap that no one sees	16.09.2015 Aftenposten
Niåringen var utagerende. Skolens løsning: Isolasjon i nesten ett år.	The nine-year old was acting out. The schools' solution: Isolation for almost a year.	27.10.2015 Aftenposten
Skolelederforbundet: «Å isolere en elev over tid, er uholdbart»	Skolelederforbundet: «To isolate a pupil over time is untenable»	28.10.2015 Aftenposten
Hvem skal trøste knøttet?	Who shall comfort «knøttet» ⁵ ?	16.02.2016 Aftenposten
Flere og flere elever går ut av 10. klasse uten karakterer i mer enn halvparten av fagene. Ingen vet hvorfor.	More and more pupils graduate the 10th grade without grades in more than half of the classes. No one knows why.	06.07.2016 Aftenposten
Sluses ut av klasserommet og samfunnet	Sifted out of the classroom and society	31.08.2016 NRK
Hanne (15) er langt fra alene	Hanne (15) is far from alone	01.09.2016 NRK

⁵ 'Knøttet' could be translated to 'the small one'.

Barneombudet advarer: - Halvparten av spesialundervisningen er uten kvalifiserte lærere	Children's ombudsman warns: - Half of the special needs education is without qualified teachers	15.11.2016 Aftenposten
Forsvarer bruk av assistenter i spesialundervisning	Defending the use of assistants in special needs education	16.11.2016 Aftenposten
De uviktige barna	The unimportant children	28.11.2016 VG
Kunnskapsminister, du må ikke juble for høyt	Minister of Education and Research, you must not cheer too loud	08.12.2016 Aftenposten
Jeg levde med diagnosen «dysleksi» i flere år. Egentlig var jeg svaksynt	I was living with the diagnose «dyslexia» for several years. In reality, I was visually impaired	12.12.2016 Aftenposten
Det fossile hjørnet: Skolen skal fange opp elever som sliter	The fossil corner: The school shall catch up pupils who struggle	14.12.2016 Aftenposten
Norsk skole trenger flere tester av de yngste barna	The Norwegian school need more testing of the youngest children	03.02.2017 Aftenposten
«Jeg kan ikke sitte stille og se på den behandlingen vi gir de elevene som trenger god undervisning mest.»	«I can't sit still and watch the way we treat the pupils that need good education the most»	06.03.2017 VG
Fra paragrafbarn til mestringsbarn	From paragraph children to mastery children	07.03.2017 Dagbladet
De elevene som trenger mest hjelp, får det dårligste tilbudet. Slik kan ikke Skole-Norge fortsette.	The children who need the most help, get the poorest offer. Educational Norway cannot continue like this.	14.03.2017 Aftenposten
Alternativet til spesialundervisning	The alternative to special needs education	20.03.2017 Aftenposten
Ikke visste jeg at kommunen mente en spesialskole egnet seg best for «slike som meg»	Not did I know that the municipality thought a special	24.03.2017 Adresseavisa

	school was the most suitable for «people like me»	
Spesialundervisningen er skolens ømme tå	Special needs education is the schools' "tender toe"	19.04.2017 Aftenposten
Minstenorm for lærertetthet er en nødvendig, men ikke tilstrekkelig forutsetning for likeverdig opplæring	A minimum standard for teacher density is a necessity, but not an adequate prerequisite for equal education	21.04.2017 Aftenposten
Nedleggelsen av spesialskoler ble en katastrofe for noen barn	The closing of special schools became a catastrophe for some children	12.06.2017 Aftenposten
-Elever med funksjonsnedsettelse får ufaglærte lærere: - Diskriminering på systemnivå.	-Students with disabilities get inexpert teachers: - Discrimination on a system level.	16.08.2017 Dagbladet
Sliter med samarbeidet med skolen: «Som forelder til et barn som strever, føler du deg mislykket nok fra før.»	Struggles with the cooperation with the school: «As a parent to a child that struggle, you feel unsuccessful enough from before.»	25.10.2017 Aftenposten
ADHD Norge: «Det er ingen barn i skolen i dag som vil være slemme eller ødelegge for de andre. Alle vil jo bare passe inn.»	ADHD Norge: «There are no children in school today that wants to be bad or ruin for the others. Everyone just wants to fit in.»	26.10.2017 Aftenposten
Barneombudet: Foreldre opplever å bli møtt av «pedagogisk arroganse»	The children's ombudsman: Parents experience being met by «pedagogical arrogance»	26.10.2017 Aftenposten
Skolen er tilpasset A4-eleven som ikke finnes	The school is adapted to the A4- student that doesn't exist	27.11.2017 Aftenposten

4.6 Data analysis

As I present my data analysis and the analytical process, I will try to be as transparent as possible. The approach that was used for the analysis of the data material is thematic analysis. In this approach, the researcher search for themes and subthemes in the text and use them to analyze the data (Bryman, 2008). After I had collected my sample, I started reading about

coding to be able to understand how to categorize the data in the sample in an effective and useful way, relating to my research questions. Coding in qualitative research is the process where data is broken down into components and categories which are given names, linking ideas to the data and vice versa (Bryman, 2008; Saldaña, 2009). One of the primary goals of coding is to find repetitive patterns documented in the data (Saldaña, 2009), and I chose to devote a considerable amount of time and attention to this process, considering the type of analysis that would follow from it. I prepared the articles for manual coding and analyzing by printing them and sorting them in a folder by publishing date, as well as numbering them to navigate through them quickly. The next step was to read the sample more thoroughly, as I had already skimmed through them during the sampling methods. While reading through the texts, specific topics and patterns that appeared were ‘pre-coded’ with markings and notes which would later become the foundation for the final coding frame (Saldaña, 2009). I also made good use of a research diary where all analytical questions and thoughts were written down for analytical consideration later in the process.

4.6.1 Coding

Due to the research questions, I decided to use two different sets of codes. The research questions ask for both the main topics of the debate as well as the participants in it. The first set of coding that was done on the sample is within what Saldaña (2009) calls *attribute coding*. Also known as ‘descriptive’ or ‘context’ codes, attribute coding is usually the notation of basic information in the sample. This type of coding is particularly useful for studies with multiple participants, such as this one. When reading the sample thoroughly, it became apparent that there was a larger number of different people involved in some way in the debate than initially believed, and that something was needed to be able to navigate efficiently through them. This was also a useful way to map out and get an overview of all the different individuals for later analysis in relation to the research questions. The different people were divided into six categories, based on their appearance, profession or other roles in the sample. The categories are: 1) Individuals under the age of 18, 2) Parent, 3) Journalist, 4) Politician, 5) Professional and 6) Other. Categories 5 and 6 were somewhat difficult to separate, but the criteria for being in the ‘professional’ category is that the individual has a profession where he or she works with or does research on or with children, excluding interest organizations. The categories were each given a color that would be found on the first page of each of the texts, representing what voices are present in that specific document.

The second set of codes belong in the coding method called topic coding, or *descriptive coding*. In this type of coding, the researcher summarizes passages of text according to the general topic instead of the substance of the message in the passage (Saldaña, 2009). Because the research aims to see what the main topics are discussed in the debate, it seemed natural to use this method. Reading through the documents I used a notepad where I would first write the number of the article, and then for each one, I would write down the main topics that appeared. After doing this with the entire sample, I looked through the topics and was able to see patterns and the frequency of which the different topics appeared. Because the topics of *inclusion* and *exclusion* are in the research questions, they were naturally used as codes. The other two main topics that were discovered are named *competence* and *content*. The four themes can in a way be seen as two pairs. They are not the same, but they are closely linked, a matter that will become more apparent in the following chapters. While broad categories such as these can sometimes lead to a superficial analysis (ibid.), I found that these sizeable topical categories were useful to work with and that the pieces of text within the category divided itself naturally into smaller, more detailed codes later in the process. Other smaller recurring topics were looked at during the initial phase but later added as subthemes under the four main categories.

4.7 Limitations and challenges with the study

It is important for the researcher to be aware of the limitations and challenges with the study. In this section. Some of the possible weaknesses of this study and in what ways they may have affected the work will be discussed. These might be problems that are common for students and inexperienced researchers, but they are nevertheless important to comment on. The main challenge for me was that the study that I conducted was not the study that I planned and prepared for the most. While I had some knowledge about the method of document analysis, it was very limited. In this sense I found the method to be somewhat challenging, in addition to the challenges the data material itself provided. Because the documents are newspaper articles I did not have access to the raw material such as interview transcriptions and there are many different people who have been able to voice their opinion. The commonality of the documents is that they in some way are concerned with special needs education, but they have different points of interests, and it was necessary to remember that the documents are likely to have agendas (Rose and Grosvenor, 2001). Because of this, there might be aspects that have been overseen or lost.

Another main challenge has been to keep the focus on the material that will answer my research questions, and not to dive into what the different opinions are and then discuss them. I needed to remind myself often that my study does not intend to discuss the different views in the debate, but rather look at who and what constitutes the debate. The most useful tool to ensure the right focus was to keep a copy of the aim and research questions for the project in front of me, to continually remind me to stay on point (Saldaña, 2009).

A limitation of this study might be that only one method has been used. Document analysis is often used in combination with, or in complement to other methods in qualitative research, and triangulation – the use of a combination of methods – is often expected to ensure corroboration and validation through different data sources. However, document analysis can be used as the only method if documents are the only valuable source, depending on the research questions (Bowen, 2009), which is the case with this study. When using one single method, it is also important to be transparent and describe the analysis process, which I have done above.

The last point that I will mention regarding limitations is that the study was conducted by only one researcher. The two reasons why this could be seen as a limitation is that my experience as a researcher is limited, and the fact that people construct meaning differently. According to Saldaña (2009), it is valuable to have multiple coders to make sure that nothing significant is missed, and that the coding complies with the data. As I mentioned, because of the nature of the documents I did not have access to either raw material or the contributors in the debates and could not use them as a means of validation. However, I believe that transparently explaining the process in this chapter is a step in the direction of validity and reliability.

4.8 Ethical reflections

Ethical considerations are a part of all research, maybe especially with children and youth, and other vulnerable groups (Ennew et al., 2009). While document analysis is often considered to have fewer ethical dilemmas than other methods that are more intrusive and personal, there are still some ethical concerns. The three main concerns for this study are those of subjectivity, interpretation, and representation.

Because the researcher will always have some form of understanding of the topic in question, based on his or her background and experiences, subjectivity is always a matter in qualitative

research in particular. It is important that the researcher is aware of this, and try to take measures to avoid it such as being reflexive and to always evaluate him or herself. This is maybe especially important when the study is conducted with newspaper articles that are rarely subjective and can sometimes be written for a specific purpose, without much contextual information, and in a way that will speak to the emotions of the reader. The systematic coding and analysis have helped to detach some of the emotional rhetoric of the data material without compromising the analytical context and to make sure that conclusions can be traced back to the material.

Lastly, it is essential to keep in mind that this thesis does not aim to give an account of whether special needs education works or not, or how it should be. It is likely that the positive experiences with the educational system are not brought to the attention of the media as much as it should, and therefore the analysis may be making the debate to appear, in a way, one-sided. However, the aim is to explore and provide an analysis of the public debates concerning the educational offer that is given to some of the most vulnerable students in the public Norwegian educational system. The study does not propose to make a statistical generalization based on the available data about special needs education as a phenomenon.

Chapter 5:

Representation and Perspectives

This chapter aims to present and discuss the different ‘voices’ in the public debate about special needs education in online newspapers between 2014 and 2017. The contributions to the debate are not only written by journalists, but many other people with different roles and professions, such as professors and researchers, children and youth, parents, and educators, to mention some. The focus in this chapter will be identifying the different people that are present in the debate, their roles and professions and how they are represented. Further, acknowledging that the debate is multifaceted and complex, different perspectives in the disability discourse will be identified through examples, showing the models of disability described in chapter 2. To identify these perspectives, some examples of arguments on how special needs education should be carried out, whose responsibility it is and where the ‘problems’ lie will be used. This will give a platform for the next chapter, which will focus on the major topics within the debate.

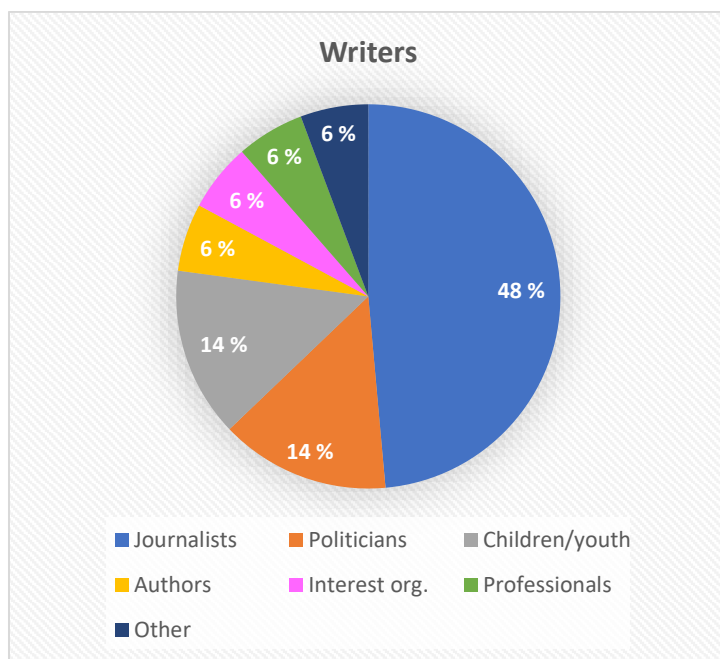
5.1 Who are present in the debates?

Above, some of the different roles and professions that are present in the debates are mentioned, and in this section, I will dig more into numbers and how the various contributors are spread among the various groups. In the 35 articles in the sample, there are 77 individuals in total who have written articles or are represented by interviews or comments. This number is not including names that are just mentioned, or when there are passages copied from reports or research.

Seventeen articles are written by journalists and commentators, 5 are by politicians⁶ and another 5 by children/youth. 2 name themselves as authors, members of various interest organizations have written 2 articles, and another 2 have been written by what I categorize as “professionals”, specifically a professor and a teacher in special needs education. The remaining two articles are written by the leader of a local department of the educational and

⁶ One of these, Sanna Sarromaa (2015 and 2016) resigned as a local politician in 2015, but is still categorized as a politician here.

psychological counseling service (PPT)⁷, and the children’s ombudsman at the time, categorized as ‘other’ in the table below. The categorization is based on what is listed in the articles as the role or profession, and in most articles, this is stated after the name of the writer. Some contributors have more than one role, for example professor and parent, and in these cases, the role that is listed first in the presentation of the writer is used to categorize him or her. Therefore, the table below functions as a graphic overview of the primary role of the writers in the sample.



Represented in the articles, in addition to those mentioned above are others within the category professionals (researchers and professors within the field of education, principals, and a teacher), parents and ‘others’. This last category includes members of different interest organizations and unions and a chief municipal education officer⁸.

5.1.1 *Re-appearing individuals*

Some names are seen several times, including both writers of articles and people who comment on the cases in them. There may be many reasons as to why some names appear more than once, but that will not be part of the analysis. Here is a short account of the individuals:

⁷ Pedagogisk-psykologisk tjeneste (PPT).

⁸ In Norwegian: Skoleleder.

Anne Lindboe, who was the children’s ombudsman from 2012 to 2018, is one of the names that naturally would appear more than once. She has written one of the articles in the sample and is featured by comments in two others. While many people do research on and work with special needs education, there are few people who are present as ‘expert commentators’ in the sample and some of these appear more than once. Researcher and professor Marie-Lisbet Amundsen is featured in three articles. Professor in pedagogy Peder Haug and researcher in pedagogy Thomas Nordahl is featured in two articles each. In addition to these three, there are six other individuals with similar professions appearing one time each, two of them have written their own pieces. There are a few journalists’ names that also appear several times. Hanne Mellingsæter has written four articles, one in 2016 and three in October 2017. Jørgen Svarstad and Helene Skjeggstad have written two each. Minister of Education and Research Torbjørn Røe Isaksen appear twice, having written an article and is interviewed in another. Two other politicians appear two times each as well, Tone Tellevik Dahl and Sanna Sarrmaa. They have both written two articles each of the sample. The last person whose name is seen several times is author Olaug Nilssen. She has written two pieces and is interviewed in the third.

Name:	Role/profession:	Written:	Featured in:
Anne Lindboe	Children’s ombudsman	1	2
Marie-Lisbet Amundsen	Professor in Special Needs Education	-	3
Peder Haug	Professor in Pedagogy	-	2
Thomas Nordahl	Researcher in Pedagogy	-	2
Hanne Mellingsæter	Journalist	4	-
Jørgen Svarstad	Journalist	2	-
Helene Skjeggstad	Commentator (journalist)	2	-
Torbjørn Røe Isaksen	Politician	1	1
Tone Tellevik Dahl	Politician	2	-
Sanna Sarrmaa	(Former) Politician/parent	2	-
Olaug Nilssen	Author/parent	2	1

5.2 Who is not present?

While many roles and professions are represented in the debates, some are also noticeably missing. There are interviews with, comments, and articles by many professionals that work with special needs education such as professors, researchers, and special needs educators. However, ‘regular’ teachers and assistants are under-represented in the articles. Teachers and assistants without specialization in special needs education are frequently mentioned and discussed, something that will be examined in chapter 6, but there is only one single place this

group is present as autonomous contributors. In an article from March 2017 (Skjeggstad, 2017b), a teacher is quoted about her work at what is said to be Oslo's first dyslexia friendly school. It is a short passage where she talks about what they are doing differently now, to make it dyslexia friendly. She is described as a teacher, and there is no mention of any additional specialization, making it plausible that she has an education in teaching, but not specialized in special needs education.

5.2.1 *Principals*

Principals are represented in more articles, but only in one way. Some of the articles in the sample revolve around specific cases about individual students. Journalists most often write these, and they are usually about an event which has had a negative impact on the education of a student. Different people are interviewed or asked to comment on the case or the tendency of the situation in general. In some of these cases, the principals are requested to comment as well and are posed critical questions about the choices and decisions the school has made. In one case (Svarstad, 2015), where a nine-year-old boy was educated in isolation for a year due to his temper and acting out, the journalist writes that the principal of the school does not want to comment on specific elements of the case and continues to feature the answers to some more general questions. The principal is asked questions like "Is it okay to isolate a pupil for a year?", "Do you agree with the decisions that were made?" and "Would you like to make an apology?". The principal, who is anonymized in the article like the family, give generalized answers that seem as neutral as possible, saying that the school has looked at their routines and that it is difficult to either agree or disagree. In one answer it is also revealed that he/she was not the principal when this event occurred. The same tendency is shown in 2016 (Skogstrøm, 2016), where it is stated explicitly that the principal did not want to comment on specifics, followed by a neutral comment:

"An assistant is only used in situations where it is recommended by PPT. When there is sickness there is always a substitute. Only in a few exceptions is the substitute not an educated teacher." (Skogstrøm, 2016)

In 2017 (Mellingsæter, 2017a), another case was brought up. It is shown mainly from the view of the parents of a boy with behavioral issues and revolves around their experiences with how the school handled the boy's ADHD. In this case, the school chose to contact Child Protective Services about the boy's behavior, and the parents felt as though their parenting

was questioned. In the article both the principal during the event and the current principal were asked to comment on the situation. They were asked about the competence surrounding ADHD, why they involved Child Protective Services and about what they could have done differently. Like in the other examples the answers are as neutral as possible, but they do comment on the specific case. About the boy the former principal says:

“-He had days where he was happy and functioned well, but there were also periods where we saw a boy that was not feeling very well. In periods it could be demanding, because the measures we tried did not work the way we wanted” (Mellingsæter, 2017a)

When asked what they could have done differently he answers:

“- There are probably some things that we could have done differently, without me being able to point to something concrete. We followed the advice and recommendations we got from professionals. It is possible that we could have been better at giving him practical tasks.” (Mellingsæter, 2017a)

The answers that are given by these principals seem neutral in the way that they are neither positive or negative towards what has happened, and the decisions that were made regarding the students. Even though principals, teachers, and assistants are some of the people that have the most contact with students and their parents, their representation and presence in the debates is not nuanced in the sense that their own perspectives are not found in the debates. One would think that they have opinions, experience, and knowledge on the topic of special needs education, but this group of educators might struggle with ensuring confidentiality and a fear of directing negative attention to their workplace and colleagues by voicing their opinions publicly.

5.2.2 Fear of repercussion?

Of course, this might not be the only reason why some stay out of the debates, but the fear of repercussion might be one of them. When working with children and other groups of people, there are strict confidentiality agreements on what one can and cannot talk about outside the workplace. One of the principals mentioned above did not want to comment on the specific case due to confidentiality, even though the parents agreed to waive it. Even though opinions and potential criticism does not violate confidentiality, one might still face some consequences, as we can see from the following examples:

In 2017, an article was published in the online part of the newspaper Aftenposten (Elnan and Eggesvik). It described how a teacher had questioned a practice at his/her workplace, a school in Oslo. The teacher, who remains anonymous in the article, did this through a post on a personal Facebook account and was careful to leave the name of the school out. Shortly after, the Education Agency (Utdanningsetaten) contacted the school, and the teacher removed the post. According to the journalists Elnan and Eggesvik (2017), the Education Agency claimed that they had only contacted the school to make sure they had been following the guidelines regarding the practice the teacher had written about. They also expressed explicitly in an email to the newspaper that all employees of the municipality have freedom of speech that extends to social media. However, as the teacher points out, they must have made an effort to identify the workplace. In the age of social media, it can be easy to find information on, for example, where a person is employed based on a full name, and it can thus be difficult to protect your identity when writing articles that are published in newspapers or other digital platforms.

Two years earlier, in 2015, the same newspaper had an article describing how principals and school administrators experienced little acceptance when they publicly expressed criticism towards educational policies. The example used in the article is a principal that was told by the municipality that he was expected to be loyal towards their decisions. If not, a termination of his employment might be a consequence (Johansen, 2015). This tendency of sanctioning is supported by a report from The Fafo Institute for Labor and Social Research (FAFO). The report does not only concern educational professions, but employees' opportunities to discuss work-related issues and the opportunity to be socially engaged in their field of work outside the workplace in general. Thirty-three percent of the participants in the study agreed to different extents that their employer limits their opportunity to express their views about the workplace. In addition, six out of ten felt that they were not free to answer inquiries and questions from the press. It is also worth noting that the report shows that employees in the public sector deem their external freedom of speech more unsatisfactory than employees in the private sector (Trygstad and Ødegård, 2016).

5.3 The power of context

Careful use of sections from interviews can contribute to shaping the meaning of an article. Even though quotes used in newspaper articles are hopefully what the interviewee said, the

format of these kinds of articles allow much editing and contextualization for the writer. I do not propose to question the integrity of the journalists writing the articles. However, it is important to keep in mind that articles can be written to further a particular perspective and in order to keep the attention of the reader, questions and arguments are often formulated in a confrontational way. Even though the included quotes are word by word what was said, it could have been taken out of context. In addition, journalists work with strict deadlines that could affect the context of the article.

5.3.1 *Emotional Setting*

In the sample, thirteen articles feature children and youth's view. Children and young people write five of them, and they are featured with comments in the remaining eight, meaning that the article is written by someone else, most often a journalist. Looking at where they are presented in the articles gives us an idea of how certain people and quotes from them can be used for a rhetorical purpose. In several of the articles that feature young people's voices, it is seen that quotes from them are placed in the very beginning of the article or as concluding words at the end. In the first example below, citations are used both to open and to complete the article.

In an article from September 2015 (Baugstø), a 17-year-old student is interviewed about his experience with dyslexia in high school. He is concerned that he will not be able to pass all his exams, as it is obligatory to have a third language class in high school. The article opens with a quote from him stating:

“- No teacher asks a student without legs to run 60 meters. To lack a leg is a visible handicap. Dyslexia is also a handicap, but it is a handicap no one sees.” (Baugstø, 2015)

The interview continues, not as questions and answers, but as statements from the journalist explaining the quote that follows. Further, the article includes comments from two different experts before including another quote from the student in between the writing of the journalist. Finally, the article is concluded by a final quote:

“- It would be much more useful for me to have more English. Instead, I have to use three years on struggling through a course I will never have use for later in life. It is so unnecessary.” (Baugstø, 2015)

In other articles, quotes are only used in the beginning.

“- If someone had sold drugs to my brother, I would have been pissed off, says Gorm (15).”
(Svarstad, 2014)

This quote is from an article about an alternative to the inclusive school, a school that focuses more on practical than theoretical learning. This opening quote does not directly relate to the topic of the article but is understood to be a part of a discussion in one of the classes. Another article opens:

“- I think it was here.” (Svarstad, 2015)

This quote follows an illustrative photo of a young boy looking through a window of a building that represents the school. The article is about a case where a nine-year-old boy was isolated during large parts of the school year in a room alone with an assistant who provided his education.

The last article in the sample to open this way is from 2016 (Wernersen and Fjeld). At the top of the article, there is a video of an interview with Hanne, the 14-year-old girl, and her mother. Hanne has cerebral palsy, depends on a wheelchair and communicates through a computer she controls with her eyes. There are two quotes from her in the text following the video:

“- Awesome, I look forward to every day, a robotic voice sounds in the room.”

“- The smaller room is as boring as watching paint dry, sounds the voice from the screen.”
(Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016)

The first of the two quotes open the text and is followed by a paragraph written by the journalist and then the following quote. Both of them are from the interview in the video, and no other comments are included from either Hanne or her mother.

Quotes from children and young conclude other articles:

“- I want to change, he finishes.” (Hansen, Eikås and Seferowicz, 2014)

“- I think a bit that the others may have had something in secondary school that I haven't. Then I may have to read a little extra, but I think it will be fine.” (Mellingsæter 2016)

“Or to say it with Aisha's words: I just want the opportunity to show the teacher what I know I can do.” (Skjeggstad, 2017b)

Opening the main textual body of the article with quotes is relatively usual in the sample, but especially the ones that open the text seem to be somewhat taken out of context when looking

at the rest of the interviews. However, even though they may seem out of context, they usually illustrate both the main argument of the article as well as the specific cases.

5.3.2 *Children and youth for rhetorical purpose?*

In addition to the pattern of using quotes from children and young people in the beginning and end of articles, another pattern can be seen in the representation of this group. The interviews with young people make out relatively small parts of the articles, even when they concern a specific case or situation involving one individual student. When they write their own articles, they elaborate more on their experience and point of view, their thoughts on the educational system, what they believe is wrong and what they think needs to be changed. The young people that have written their own texts are between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, and the range of those who are featured is twelve to seventeen. This means that the ages of the autonomous writers and those who are featured is not very different and thus age should not be a factor of whether or not the children and youth who are featured are able to provide their perspectives on their situations. In research, the perspectives of children and youth have increasingly been emphasized, showing the capability and competence in issues that concern them (Ytterhus, Snæfríður, Egilson, Traustadottir and Berg, 2015). However, with the exception of one article (Baugstø, 2015), quotes and statements from children and young are limited to more or less confirming the main arguments the journalist or other contributors write in the article. Smaller citations are used, and often pieces of interviews are placed right before or after strong arguments from experts or journalists. The comments do show their point of view, such as this passage:

“- I did everything I should have, but I used to mess around a little. Maybe once a day I used to make a little noise and run around a little. But it wasn't just me. And we were just kids, he says.” (Svarstad, 2015).

This is the way the 12-year-old boy remember how he behaved in school a few years earlier when the school decided to isolate him from the rest of the students for nearly a year as they considered his behavior disruptive. The article argues that isolating a student for an extended period is unacceptable and that it should not have happened, and the quote contributes to the argument. The largest part of the article is built on segments written by the journalist and comments/interviews from “experts” on the isolation of students. Another quote is added to emphasize that inclusion in the classroom is the “right” way to do it, as this quote states that

he used to run away from the separate room because he thought it was boring to be alone at school.

This way of adding shorter quotes from the young people involved is seen several times and seem to be used for a rhetorical or argumentative purpose. Much more space is given to ‘outside commentators’, that argue based on the general tendency, rather than giving space to those who experience the situation. This touches upon the power-relations between children and adults, and in this case children with various disabilities. The adults are seen as the experts on education and the educational system, and the children are seen as having a marginalized position within this system relating to the perceived status of children (Punch, 2002). This has also been very common in research, where the perspectives of the (disabled) children and youth have been excluded in favor of the views of parents and professionals (Ytterhus et al., 2015).

5.4 Retrospect view

Many of the articles are written from a retrospect view. Most of the cases and happenings throughout the sample describe something that has happened earlier and is now either resolved or close to being resolved. This tendency is seen both in articles written by journalists and those written by other individuals. Some of the pieces are also about situations that were ongoing at the time the article was written, such as “- They will call the police if my son comes to school” (Hansen and Eikås, 2014), where the parents of a boy with ADHD have struggled for years with the education of their son. In the article, they explain how they feel the school was not handling their case well and had excluded him. The article is in a way used to shed light on the situation, as NRK posted a follow-up article (Solhaug and Gimmingsrud, 2015) a few months later, stating that a decision had been made in favor of the boy returning to school. However, the majority of the articles in the sample are written retrospectively.

5.5 Parental struggles with the system

The voice of a parent can be seen in eight of the 35 articles in the sample. They describe and comment on their experiences with the educational system as a parent to a child with a disability. For these parents, the relation to public services is often one of the most challenging parts of having a child with special needs or disability. They are being sent

between different services and offices, met with suspicion, lack information, and often go through complaints and appeals (Tøssebro, 2010). This is also the case for many of the parents in the articles. As described earlier in this chapter, one of the cases describes how the parents of a 10-year-old boy are struggling with a relationship with the school. The boy had some behavioral issues at school as he sometimes acts out and can kick, hit, bite or pull the hair of the people around him, and Child Protective Services were contacted. The parents felt that their competence as parents were questioned, adding to their struggles:

“- It was horrible. One wonders what they think about us, and what conclusions they have made. As a parent to a child that struggles, you feel like a failure enough from before.”
(Mellingsæter, 2017a).

The school argues that they contacted the Child Protective Services not because they doubted the parents, but because they wanted additional support and help with the situation. Nonetheless, the parents felt that they were not given enough information on the situation and that their capabilities were under scrutiny. Similarly, the Children’s Ombudsman found these tendencies when researching the special needs education. In an interview, she says that many students and their parents have described being met with arrogance when they try to explain situations to the schools. They feel that their knowledge and experience is considered less valid than that of teachers and other educators (Mellingsæter, 2017c). This is mentioned in several different places, for example;

“- Us parents think we know what he needs, but we were not always included in councils [...]”
(Skogstrøm, 2016).

This statement is from an interview with the mother of a student in special needs education. In addition to being a parent, she also works as a special needs teacher and is active in an interest organization for people with dyslexia. Nevertheless, her experiences and opinions are not always included by the school when they make decisions about the education of her son. A last example of how a parent can be met with this arrogance is described by a boy telling how he was wrongly diagnosed (Nilsen, 2016). His father protested when he was diagnosed with dyslexia but was met with resistance from the school, who facilitated the test. He found out that another test was available for the diagnosis, and after a while, his son was finally allowed to take it. It showed that he did not have dyslexia, but had problems with his vision.

5.6 Models of disability

The models of disability described in chapter 2 relate to how children and youth with disability are talked about and presented in the public debates. The perspectives are not expressed explicitly, but how the different individuals think of disability and special educational needs is shown through what they have stated in the various articles in the sample and through patterns throughout the sample. It can be visible in many ways, for example in descriptions of individuals or cases, the way they talk about their own experiences, or in the way someone thinks special needs education should be done. It is also important to note, as we will see, that it is not always clear-cut what model is prominent in the thinking. There are instances where a passage points to both the individual tragedy model and the social model – without entirely fitting into the constructionist model who in a way combines them. There are some who describe a ‘problem’ within one of the models and propose a solution which is more within another, or with one statement pointing to one perspective and another in the next. This makes it difficult to place individuals in a specific perspective, mainly because there is no access to the raw material or individuals. However, I will try to provide an overview and examples of the views in the sample.

5.6.1 *The general thinking*

Before going into specific statements and quotes that point to the perspectives in the discourse on disability, I want to explore some of the overlaying tendencies and patterns in the debates. One of the ideas that seem to be commonly accepted is that Special Needs Education is a means to an end, which means that special educational needs are problems that need to be solved or taken care of. The students that do not fit into the educational system that we have in Norway today need to be taken care of in terms of special needs education or by facilitated and individualized teaching. In general, most people in the debates want to implement more facilitated teaching that is adapted to the individual student primarily in the classroom, in favor of a separate Special Needs Education in groups or individually. Measures seem to have been taken in this direction as well, but many still criticize the widespread use of separated teaching for special needs students, as we will see in the next chapter. However, when talking about facilitated teaching, it almost always concerns the students that are considered to have special educational needs, not all students. As one of the young people, Mikkel (Sollie, 2017), states in his article:

“Despite many measures the last years to facilitate the teaching to each student, the school is still adapted the A4-student – a student you don’t find in any Norwegian classroom.”

He points out that no student is the same, and that all students have individual needs. Others discuss whether or not specialized, separate schools are a good option or not for individuals with special educational needs. Working from a constructionist perspective, disability is constructed by society based on what is seen as normal and abnormal. The students that do not fit into the educational system as it is are seen as abnormal and are often described with one or more diagnoses. In most of the articles concerning specific individuals or cases, the diagnosis is mentioned explicitly. While the articles in the sample are chosen because they concern Special Needs Education and not education in general, the pattern of distinguishing the children that have special needs and those who do not is quite clear. The common perspective, with a few exceptions, is that in the educational setting disability is a problem that needs to be solved, and Special Needs Education is the most widespread solution at the time these articles were written. The perspectives that are visible in specific quotes do not necessarily point to the foundational model that is supported, but rather how to deal with Special Needs Education as an already established solution.

5.6.2 *An individual problem*

The three models of disability that were described in chapter 2 were the *individual tragedy* model, the *social* model, and the *constructionist* model. All three are present in the data material in varying forms, but it can be challenging to differentiate them, especially the two last ones. The social model relates more to a political way of thinking about disability, while the constructionist model relates more to the way of thinking about disabled people and their problems (Tøssebro, 2010). In the sample, very few people speak about disabilities in themselves and seeing that the debates are about education, the way the perspectives are made visible (not clear) is through the way the educational system is talked about. Such as; how should special needs students best be taken care of, or what structures are responsible for the problem at hand. In many instances, the models are also touched upon by describing the way someone else has acted.

In some statements and cases, the individual tragedy model becomes visible, such as in these passages and quotes:

“There, she hoped that the alternative school “Skarva” would straighten out her son.”
(Hansen, et al., 2014)

“- I want to change, he finishes.” (ibid.)

“It can be difficult to handle the other 27 [students] in the class if you have one student that does not handle the classroom-situation” (Aftenposten, 2015)

The two first quotes are from the same article. The first statement is made by the mother of the 15-year-old boy in the article, who made the second statement. The boy has ADHD and has had some difficult years in different schools. The family moved to another municipality and enrolled him in an alternative school, ‘Skarva’, where she hoped the adapted teaching would fit him better. She describes him as having difficulties with adapting and struggling to stay still in the school setting and then makes the statement included above. This points to him having a problem that needs to be sorted out, and that the school would ‘sort it out’. At the same time as stating that the problem lies within her son, she also hoped that a more alternative form of teaching would help him get the education he should have, pointing to a societal problem, which relates more to the social model. The son himself stated that he wants to change, accepting that he has a problem he can work on. Later, in a follow-up interview (Solhaug and Gimmingsrud, 2015), the mother stated that she thinks he knows that he needs to behave differently when he is at school, furthering the view that the problem lies, at least to an extent, within him, and can be solved if he changes. The last of the three quotes is from an article that concerns isolating a single student for a period of time. The arguments in the article call for more teachers per student and that separation is a result of teachers being stretched too thin by having sole responsibility for a class of over 20 students. The child is portrayed as the one who does not handle the situation of being in the class, pointing to the individual tragedy model, whereas with the other two models it would instead be described as the situation or structure being the more significant problem.

In this last example we can also see that the models that others build on can be pointed out:

“- Our review of expert evaluations also shows that the PP-service to a large extent places the cause of the students’ difficulties within the child. We rarely find good analyses and evaluations of the situation in the classroom, at school or of the teachers’ competence, says Lindboe.” (Mellingsæter, 2017c).

5.6.3 *A societal problem*

Because of the general topic of special needs education in the sample, many passages are related to the school as an institution or system, and how it needs to be changed or adapted to produce better results. This does not necessarily mean that all the statements on this belong to the social model, and it becomes clear what Tøssebro (2010) means when he describes the social model of disability as ‘more political’ than the other two models. He describes that this model presents an understanding of disability that could be used “as fuel in political action” (Tøssebro, 2010:18). The articles in the sample do not only elaborate and shed light on specific situations, but also present arguments on what and how certain things need to change, sometimes even directing texts or passages towards politicians:

“- It is the responsibility of the Minister of Education and Research. It’s he who should make the framework in a way that the schools can secure an inclusive learning environment for all students.” (Elvestad and Lerhol, 2016).

One quote that very directly points to the social model of disability is this one from 2014 (Svarstad), where researcher and professor in special needs education Amundsen explicitly states that the problem is that the educational system is not adapted to the variation in students, removing it from the individual student:

“- There is something wrong with the educational system, not the pupils. The schools’ structure and content contribute to creating behavioral problems. Earlier, 15-year-olds could go to sea. Now everyone is pushed through the same narrow, theoretical needle’s eye. This has serious consequences. [...]” (Svarstad, 2014).

Supporting this, Anne Lindboe, the children’s ombudsman, also argues that the educational system might cause some of the problems they are striving to solve:

“- The school does not see that the behavior of the student is a consequence of lacking or unsuccessful measures from the school.” (Mellingsæter, 2017c).

This argument points out that schools need to be aware of how they affect children, and that children’s behavior can be a reaction to the way they are being treated by educators.

5.6.4 *A complex problem*

The constructionist model, indicating that disability is relational, is most certainly present in the sample, but it is difficult to distinguish from the social model due to the topics of

discussion. Because the texts revolve around the educational system specifically and not society in general, sorting out and analyzing statements within their context and providing good examples is difficult. There are however some statements that exemplify this perspective:

“- It is not the structure or the system that is crucial, but the quality of the plan surrounding the child. All children are individuals and individuals have individual needs.” (Sarronmaa, 2015).

“- The understanding that all children and young are a part of a community has been central. The most important question has nonetheless been how we in the best possible way should help the specific child from such an understanding.” (Langås, 2016).

Especially in the texts concerning exclusion and isolation, the relational aspect of education is emphasized. While it is not explicitly stated, there is a commonsensical notion that the social relations and knowledge that is gained at school are essential for the students, pointed out by the children and young making statements towards this as well. This is established in the educational field through theories on ‘the hidden curriculum’, relating to everything children and young learn at school that they are not necessarily taught by an educator (Biesta, 2010). Kvello (2013) argues that schools can be seen as miniature societies and that the ability to navigate through this arena might be indicative of how a person will adapt to society as an adult.

5.7 Diagnoses

In many cases, as mentioned, the diagnosis of the children and youth is mentioned when describing them. It might be a way to explain what kinds of struggles the students are having in few words, but using a diagnosis to describe a person can be stigmatizing. Not all diagnoses or disabilities are stigmatized or stigmatizing but portraying an individual with a medical term of their problems attributes their behavior and personality to their impairment or struggle. For some, being diagnosed may help. It might lead to them getting the help they need, or to explain some of the struggles they have without defining them. In some situations, a diagnose can contribute to de-individualization, stigma or other negative consequences (Tøssebro, 2010).

In the articles, there are examples of both positive and negative sides of getting a diagnosis: Olaug Nilssen describes in an interview, how their son gradually changed and eventually was

diagnosed with regressive autism. She explicitly states that after he was diagnosed, they saw him differently, but she also describes him as ‘his own person’, an individual, and rather than portraying him from his diagnosis, she describes him and then compare it to what is known about other children with the same difficulties (Lillebø, 2015). Wishing he had gotten his dyslexia diagnosed sooner, one student says:

“It took three years before the primary school discovered that I had dyslexia. At this point, it was unfortunately too late to implement the most important measures.” (Sollie, 2017).

He implies that because he did not get the diagnosis sooner, he did not get the facilitation he needed to learn early enough in his education.

Sometimes, however, a diagnosis can have a somewhat negative effect. Having a diagnosis affect how people think about themselves, as well as how others think of them (Tøssebro, 2010).

“- It was good to come to a new school where I got out of the role I had for many years and that caused so much pain.” (Skogstrøm, 2016)

Daniel Lie, who made this statement is diagnosed with dyslexia and says that he was called stupid by a teacher, as he spent more time to learn than the other students. Sometimes, a diagnosis is used as a generalizing term, not taking into account the variation of the students, such as in this passage:

“And [he] adds:

- The teacher has to like ADHD-kids. If not, it just doesn’t work.” (Mellingsæter, 2017b)

A comment like this implies that all students with ADHD are similar and takes away the vast differences in personality children and youth can have, in addition to having ADHD.

Additionally, a misdiagnosis can have severe consequences for education. Ronny Nilsen (2016) criticizes the way schools can use simple tests to diagnose students and talks about the implications it had for him. He was taken into a room, given a test, and when he came out, he was told he had dyslexia. He received special needs education in a group outside the class with a student a grade lower than him, learning things he had already had in school. When he started secondary school, he took another test, and it proved that he did not have dyslexia after all. After comprehensive testing in a hospital, it was found that he had a visual impairment, and he had to spend much of his spare time learning the things he did not learn in primary

school. It seems he was given special needs education based on a wrong diagnosis, rather than one relevant for his needs and abilities.

5.8 Summarizing thoughts

This chapter has looked at some of the over-arching aspects of the public debates about special needs education. We have seen that there are many different roles and professions expressing their views. Journalists, professionals in the field of education, children and youth, parents, politicians, interest organizations, authors, and ‘other’ interested individuals contribute either by writing articles, being interviewed and providing comments. Some names appear more than once, maybe speaking to their engagement, interest, and knowledge on the topic of special needs education. The two professions that are most talked about in the articles are, however, not present. Teachers and assistants are noticeably missing, not providing their perspectives on the topics in the debates. It was discussed that fear of repercussion might be an explanation as to why the representation of principals is very one-sided, and it might also be a reason why teachers and assistants do not appear, as seen through research from FAFO.

While many articles are featuring the views of children and youth, both where they write themselves and provide comments through interviews, they are not as present as they could be, considering that they are perhaps the most central group of people in special needs education. Their quotes and comments being used as a rhetorical tool in an argument downplay the importance of their opinions in the debates about their education. Parents also suffer somewhat from this tendency, being featured in parts of the articles that are more ‘personal’, and professionals provide the ‘expert’ opinions on their specific cases. The same tendency that they experience with the educational system. This does not mean that their voices are silenced in the debates, but it speaks to how children, young people and parents are presented and represented when they do not write about their experiences and perspectives themselves.

The overview of the perspectives on disability in the debates shows that in such debates, no single perspective is used, they are used somewhat interchangeably and that they can be difficult to distinguish. The discourse on disability feature several perspectives, and while only the most common in the Nordic countries are explained here, they represent quite different views on the purpose and aim of special needs education. Lastly, drawing on the perspectives, the different ways a diagnosis can affect individuals is discussed. Even though

the different ways of using a diagnose is sometimes dependent on another person than the student with the diagnosis, it can affect him or her in a way that does not represent their view of themselves.

Having looked at these aspects and tendencies of the public debates on special needs education in Norway, the next chapter will look more closely on what is discussed. The topics of the next chapter will be what the different people who contribute to the debates are concerned about when they discuss this topic.

Chapter 6:

Major themes in the debates

In this chapter, I will give a systematic account of the major themes and topics for discussion in the public debates about special needs education. There are four major topics in the debates, which relates to questions of exclusion, inclusion, competence, and content. As explained in chapter 4, these topics can be seen as two pairs. It is difficult to talk about exclusion if there is no notion of inclusion and it is hard to separate them since they are often two sides of the same coin. Looking at notions of exclusion will show what the contributors in the debates view as inclusion in an educational setting. The relation between competence and content is a little more related to the context of the debates on special needs education. The theme competence relates to the profession and knowledge of the educators conducting the education for children in special needs education, and content is what these children do while they are at school. As we will see from the examples and discussions in this chapter, the content of the education is connected to the person giving it, which is yet again connected to both social and academic inclusion and exclusion.

6.1 ‘Out of the class’

In many of the articles, there are accounts of exclusion in different forms. There are stories about physical as well as social exclusion, and they are talked about in different ways by different people in various positions. There are for example children and youth talking about their own experiences, parents explaining situations with their children in school, professors and researchers talking from a more theoretical point of view and politicians talking about general tendencies and policies. These different viewpoints will be presented, related to each other and discussed here in relation to their contextual subtopics and implications.

Physical exclusion is the topic of some of the articles, where the pupil is either excluded from the general class or the school for various reasons. The first case about this in the sample is the first article (Svarstad, 2014). In the article, there is a part of an interview with a boy aged 15. He talks about his previous experience with attendance at his local school where he was

separated from his classmates and received his education in a separate room alone with a teacher. He for example says:

“- It was horrible and very depressing. I didn’t see anything but white walls and a teacher that was nagging at me all the time.”

The boy explains that he felt that the teachers did not understand him and what he struggled with, but at his new school, things have improved. Very little is said about why the boy was excluded from the rest of the class, and whether he had recess with the rest of the students at the school. The circumstances surrounding exclusion are however explained more in other articles on situations concerning other children. Later in 2014 (Hansen, et al.) another case is described, including a video of the mother, talking about the situation that was ongoing at the time. The 15-year-old boy attends what is called an alternative public school in the article, after struggling to adapt to several other schools. The boy struggles with ADHD and behavioral problems, and after some episodes at school with violence, threats, and involvement of the police, the school chose to separate him from the other students and have threatened to call the police again if they see him near the school. To provide the boy with some education, an offer has been made to give the boy three hours of education with two teachers in a building one and a half kilometer away from the school. In the interview the mother says:

“- He should be allowed to be here [at the school], that is what he wants too, to come here and be here every day together with the others.” (ibid.)

The exclusion has resulted in a reluctance to go to school for the boy. His mother explains that it is difficult to get her son to school, and he says himself that:

“- The way it is now, I sleep away almost the whole day. I don’t feel that I have something to get up for.”

“- It is two-three hours every day, but I don’t bother to show up. I don’t see the point of it, it gets so boring to be alone with two teachers.” (ibid.)

After one and a half month, another article is written about this case by the same newspaper (Solhaug and Gimmingsrud, 2015). They write that the mother first received an email from the principal of the school stating that the boy would continue with his education in the separate location until they had held a meeting about the situation a few days later. Then the mother received a new email stating that this offer was revoked. After receiving a phone call from the municipality with the message that the education of the boy would continue, the

mother states in an interview that her son will be happy if he is allowed back, but that he also feels that the school does not want him to be there.

Later in 2015, another similar case was brought up. A 9-year-old boy was excluded from his class because of previous behavior. No specific diagnoses or problems are identified in this case, but it is described that the behavior of the boy made the intended return to the class difficult. At the time of the newspaper article, the boy is 12 years old, and the situation is described both by him and the mother, saying that he was taken out of the class to have all his education in a separate room with an assistant. The journalist also describes that he was kept from joining the other children during recess, eating his food in the library while the other children were outside playing, and was allowed outside only after the other children had gone back inside. The boy states:

“- It wasn’t fun to watch the others play. It was lonely to sit alone.” (Svarstad, 2015)

At the time the article is written, the boy has changed schools, and it is specified that he still receives some education in a smaller group in addition to spending time in a full class. This means that while he is ‘out of the class’ parts of the day, he is no longer the only student in the room (ibid.). Following these three cases is Hanne, a 15-year-old girl with Cerebral Palsy (Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016). In 5th grade, she started receiving special needs education outside the class and describes it as incredibly boring in the interview. At the time the article was written, she had changed schools to a special needs school where it was discovered that she had not reached the academic level that was expected. Because of this, there was a need for her to return to material that is on the curriculum for students several years below her. Her mother expresses worries about her further education in returning to a regular high school as she is almost finished with secondary school.

In other articles situations are described where there are pupils that receive their education in smaller groups, usually consisting of other children with special educational needs. One boy writes with a third-person perspective and a retrospect view:

“The school placed him in a closed group with five other losers. They found out that the boy had dyslexia and specific learning difficulties. Zero hope and no future. [...]” (Oslo-gutt, 2015)

There is no mention of what kinds of struggles the other students have in this situation, but other examples show that sometimes students that are grouped together have very different needs. Examples are given by the Children’s Ombudsman who describes that a sound-

sensitive student was placed in a group with three students with behavioral issues and that a dyslectic child was placed in a group where the others had physical disabilities (Skogstrøm, 2016). It is argued that this can affect the students in various ways, both socially and academically. Ronny Nilsen, a 16-year-old student, explains in his article that during his extra education he was grouped with another boy younger than him, and they would have lessons in curricula he already had been through the previous year (Nilsen, 2016). However, in some cases, the groups fit well:

“Daniel Lie tells that it was going better in eighth grade at Østersund secondary school. There he received special needs education in a group of five where everyone was at approximately the same level.” (Skogstrøm, 2016)

Unfortunately, the article continues:

“The two next years, the group became much larger, and he says he was together with some students with behavioral issues that took the attention of the teacher.” (ibid.).

The reason behind the expansion of the group is said to be the economy of the school. This relates to why the Children’s Ombudsman talks about such groups as ‘storage groups’ where the special needs education is poor.

In the article about Hanne (Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016) a professor explains that the special needs education system that was previously run by the state is dissolved, but there are still just as many pupils that are segregated from the community. He attributes this to local solutions that there is no overview of. As shown in chapter 2, special schools were gradually supposed to be dissolved from 1992, but it is argued here that several such schools still exist and are run by municipalities or counties, rather than by the state. Elvestad and Lerhol (2016), a member of and the general secretary of two interest organizations⁹ for disabled people, state that three out of four of the children and youth that receive special needs education does so outside the classroom. There are no sources provided for this statement, but the recent report from the Children’s Ombudsman (Lindboe, 2017) states that the number of children who receive special needs education outside the class is higher than in 2003. According to Statistics Norway (2019), there were more than 49000 children and youth in grades 1.-10. who received special needs education in 2017, and during the school year of 2017/2018, numbers show that 6 402 receives it mainly alone, while 19 205 students are placed in groups of two to five. Unfortunately, no statistics were available for comparison from 2003. However, during the

⁹ Funksjonshemmedes Fellesorganisasjon and Unge Funksjonshemmede

school year 2006/2007 the overview shows that 20 077 students were mainly in groups of two to five, and 6 507 were mainly alone when having special needs education (Utdanningsdirektoratet, n.d.). These numbers show a relatively small difference in eleven years, and assuming these numbers are accurate, there is a small decrease rather than an increase in the number of students receiving special needs education outside the class.

When looking at these numbers, it is not surprising that exclusion and isolation is one of the major themes in the debates. However, as we have seen, receiving special needs education outside of the class is not always a negative thing. Daniel, described above, had positive experiences with being in a group where they were at approximately the same level academically. There are arguments both in favor of and against being separated from the class, and it has to do with the context and situation, as we can see from the examples above. Being isolated far away from the school, over extended periods of time and not having any opportunities to be part of the social community generally produce arguments against it. In cases where being alone or in smaller groups have worked well for the student, people argue that it can be a good measure in special needs education. These two types of separation are different and have different consequences for the students.

6.1.1 Sense of belonging/social relations

One of the concerns relating to exclusion and receiving special needs education outside the general class is the social aspect. Being away from the class during lessons can affect the social relationships and sense of self of the students. The Norwegian Education Act (Opplæringslova, 1998, § 8-2) states that the student body should be divided into classes or groups that shall safeguard their social belonging, but that they can be separated into other groups when needed for parts of the education. Further, it is stated that the grouping should usually not be based on gender, ethnicity or academic level. Arguments throughout the texts against the types of isolation and exclusion seen above are sometimes founded in this law, such as this passage:

“According to Nordahl, isolation generally breaks the intention of the Education Act.

- In the Education Act, it is stated that all students shall be in classes or in smaller groups, that cover their need for social inclusion.

- When you over an amount of time is isolated from others, you will not be able to cover your need for social inclusion, and you risk that the students think that they are the ones there is something wrong with, Nordahl continues.” (Hansen, et al., 2014)

This passage is found in the article where the school has threatened to call the police if the student comes to the school area, where Nordahl, a professor in pedagogy, provides the two comments above. The issue of whether or not the situations and actions break with the Education Act will not be discussed in this paper but seeing that the law includes social inclusion in school speaks to the importance of it in an educational setting.

As we have seen, the children and youth in the cases presented above describe being isolated as boring and depressing, and there are comments speaking of the social aspect of being separated. One of the boys from the articles would sometimes run from the room he was in, and that he and his best friend would get together outside the school area during school hours. His reason for doing this was that it was boring being alone with the teacher (Svarstad, 2015). In the examples above, the isolation is described as horrible, depressing, meaningless and lonely by the students.

When children do not have the opportunity to fully participate in social relations with other children, not only are they bored, but they are also missing out on valuable social knowledge.

“- When the children don’t get to participate with other children in the class, it leads to them being outside, and they don’t get the social learning and participation they have a right to, says general secretary Lilly Ann Elvestad.” (Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016).

Lilly Ann Elvestad, the general secretary of The Norwegian Federation of Organisations of Disabled People (FFO), collaborates with Synne Lerhol, the general secretary of The Norwegian association of youth with disabilities, on an article the day after (Elvestad and Lerhol, 2016). They state that many children with disabilities are unhappy at school, have few close friends and that they often are left outside the social community due to receiving much education separate from the rest of the class. One of the students reflect on this in his article:

“In primary school, I lost so much faith in myself that I wasn’t recommended to spend much time with my old class. Isolated, I was sitting with assistants and special needs teachers to practice things I thought were difficult. During recess, I no longer knew how to talk to the others.” (Elev, 2016).

Further, several of the students in the sample has changed schools, sometimes more than once. There are various reasons for this, and sometimes the reason is not mentioned. We have seen

in some of the previous examples that the choice of changing schools can be founded in the parents wanting a better situation for their child in school. The change can be from one ordinary school to another, or a special needs school.

Developing social competence is a large part of attending school for children, as part of ‘the hidden curricula’ (Biesta, 2010), also mentioned in the previous chapter.

6.1.2 *Social exclusion within the classroom*

It is also important to note that social exclusion can happen even though there is no physical isolation. This is not one of the major topics in the sample, but it is brought up by Sarromaa (2015) as she states that integration does not necessarily mean inclusion. While her statements have been much criticized, especially by author and parent Olaus Nilssen (2015a), her argument about integration and inclusion is an important one. She was criticized about the foundation of this finding, seeing that she was present in the classroom in question for about fifteen minutes, where she saw a boy with difficulties working on different tasks than the rest of the class (Sarromaa, 2015). Nilssen (2015a) argues that it is very optimistic to think that a child with special needs can always follow the same tasks as children without such kinds of challenges and that they often have other goals to work with. She also states that fifteen minutes is far from enough time to be able to say whether this boy is well included or not. While this specific case is difficult to use as an example, it is not the only time this topic has been brought to attention. Holt (2004) provides specific examples from her research. Her first example is quite short, only telling that in one of the schools, the teachers often decided where children would sit in the classroom. Due to easy access, all children with special educational needs were placed together. In another example, Holt (2004) elaborates more. She explains that a girl who uses a wheelchair is described in the research diary as not having much contact with her classmates, whereas the classmates have much contact between themselves. Her teacher says that the other children often forget her during handouts in the class as well. Most of the students are seated together in groups. However, the girl in question sits at a desk alone in the back of the classroom, behind her peers. While she is integrated into the classroom, accompanied by her assistant, she is still segregated from the rest of her classmates, by physically being placed away from them.

6.1.3 Normality and normalization

Another argument concerning exclusion is that of normality and normalization. Normality is a term that relates to what is seen as normal, often in relation to what is considered abnormal, while normalization is when something considered abnormal or outside the norm is being implemented in a norm. According to Solum (1994) normalization usually relates to the degree of the disability. This means that when the disability is more severe, there will be less normalization, and there will be more normalization when the disability is less severe. When looking at the sample, however, there are questions of normalization and normality both in cases where the disability is considered less severe as well as quite severe. Children and youth with struggles ranging from learning difficulties and behavioral problems to physical disabilities are portrayed, and mostly with the same topics of concern from the surrounding people and professionals. Solum (1994) continues to explain that there are several other factors that will affect the degree of normalization with disabled people and development other than the general ratio. The first factor is *individual conditions* such as a diagnose or illness, the second factor is *social relations*, i.e., social exclusion, language barriers or belonging to a minority group, and the last factor is *material conditions* such as lack of education, work or food. When an individual is affected by more than one of these categories, it is likely that the degree of normalization is lower than with someone who is not affected, or only affected by one. As we have seen from the cases above, the children are affected by more than one category, often the combination of the two first factors. As we continue on the themes of competence and content, we will also see that the children in the debates are often thought to be affected by the third factor as well. As mentioned in chapter 5, there are many examples of diagnoses being presented in the articles. It is both mentioned in the articles, in the headlines, and sometimes also as part of the ‘name of the writer’. There is no doubt that many of the children and young in the debates have diagnoses, and therefore are affected by the first factor. Persons with impairments are recognized as a minority group, already applying the second factor (Ødegård, Aarum, and Eide, 2013). In addition, as we have seen, many are also subjected to social exclusion.

In chapter 2, it was established that normality affects people’s everyday lives. Separating some students from the rest of the student body based on their skills, diagnoses and abilities implies that they are abnormal, or at least not like the others. People spend much time reflecting on themselves, and this is an important part of adapting to the environment around us. A persons’ self-image is constructed based on our thoughts, opinions, and feelings about

himself, and is related to self-confidence and identity (Kvvelo, 2013). The self-image is also emotional, as it can affect the way a person feels about himself; proud, confident, shameful or different. The behavior is also affected by the self-image, and people act according to it, both when it is positive and negative (ibid.).

As explained above, the way the students are taken out of the class is a matter of interest. There are arguments both for and against separating students with special educational needs. This is mainly divided into the two different variations mentioned earlier, where arguments against usually revolve around more or less complete isolation, and arguments in favor often point to a partial separation from the general class. When the students are isolated against their and their parents' will, it may affect the notion of normality more than with a partial separation. The students that are isolated have been described as dangerous and disruptive.

6.2 The competent educator

The next topic of concern discussed in the articles is the competence of some of the people responsible for teaching special needs education. The educators' competence, in addition to organization and content, is sometimes seen as a reason why special needs education can be seen as too poor. Jørgen Frost, a professor in special needs education says in his article:

“Norwegian research has, on at times an unnuanced basis, tried to show that special needs education has a too poor effect. To evaluate the quality of a special educational measure, one needs to evaluate the frames and organization of the measure; the planning, execution, and evaluation of the measure; the content of the measure and the relation between teacher and student in the educational setting. This has not been done.” (Frost, 2017)

Some of the articles concern and discuss the competence of the educators and the content and execution of the education itself. This also includes to some extent the available resources of the school. In several articles, there are concerns that assistants conduct special needs education without education in teaching or special needs education. This is often, but not always connected to the content of the education and what the children and youth do during special needs education within or outside the class. In some cases, the resources of the schools are questioned in relation to this, as well as general competence on certain diagnoses. We have already seen in situations mentioned above that children can sometimes be put alone in a room to receive their education with an assistant full time. I will now explore some of the concerns and arguments surrounding this topic.

6.2.1 Assistants as teachers

Throughout the sample, there are different numbers presented about how many children receive special needs education from unqualified teachers, assistants, and people without relevant education. The term ‘assistant’ is not defined in the sample but is referred to as people who work with education but are not trained teachers. According to Utdanning (2019), most assistants have a high-school education called Child Care and Youth Work (barne- og ungdomsarbeider). Elvestad and Lerhol stated in their article in 2016 that around 40 percent of special needs education is given by assistants without relevant education, without any reference to where this number comes from. Later in 2016, the Minister of Education and Research at the time, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen, is asked what he wants to do about the fact that 50 percent of special needs education being given by an unqualified teacher, without any further reference than stating that this is according to the Children’s Ombudsman (Dommerud, 2016). In 2017, this number appeared again where it is stated that:

“According to The Children’s Ombudsman, 50 percent of the special needs education is without qualified teachers. It is untenable that those who need the most help are educated by substitutes and unqualified persons.” (Skjeggstad, 2017)

A few months later, Morten Hendis, the administration manager with the Children’s Ombudsman states in an interview that between 30 and 70 percent of the education for disabled children is covered by unqualified teachers, people without education and assistants. He states that there is research to support this but does not mention where specifically.

It is important to note that when the competence of the assistants is brought up, it is not argued that they do not have the competence to work in an educational institution. Many imply that they are an important asset in education. However, it is argued that they do not have the competence to be responsible for the special needs education of students with this need. This is one of the main concerns in the debates. In an interview, the leader of the workers union for chief municipal education officers, Solveig Hvidsten Dahl says:

“- The assistant can be very skillful and to an extent do a very good job, but for students with great interaction challenges to get the help they need, a completely different expertise is needed. This is an expertise that is not necessarily given in the teacher education either.” (Aftenposten, 2015).

It is argued that assistants do not have the expertise to work with the problematics that many students in this part of the education have and that the teaching is not adequate in many of these instances. Thomas Nordahl, one of the expert commentators, argues that the quality of the teaching given by assistants is poor because they are less occupied with learning outcomes and results (Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016). Others argue that the groups led by assistants or teachers without qualification are so-called ‘storage-groups’. This term is used when a group of students with special educational needs is used to fill the schedule of a teacher (Sarromaa, 2016), or when they do activities that are outside the curriculum, such as making waffles (Lindboe, 2017).

Defending the use of assistants in special needs education, the Minister of Education and Research states that when an assistant is in charge, the same assistant is usually with the student or the group in the class as well (Dommerud, 2016). He does not state where this information comes from, and no literature available confirm or deny this. However, within the same paragraph, he also states that it is not realistic to replace assistants with teachers in all situations, and the person responsible for the plan in special needs education should be an educator (ibid.). In a later article (Mellingsæter, 2017a), a school is critiqued for the way they handled a case involving a 10-year-old boy diagnosed with ADHD. The parents argue that his education was inadequate. In line with what the Minister stated, an educator developed the plan for the boy, but the teaching itself was done by an assistant. About this situation, the director of the local Child Protective Services says:

“- When it comes to ADHD problematics, predictability and structure is important. It is important that those who execute the measures have competence. What the school thinks about the persons that were placed as assistants, and if they have the right competence for the boy’s problematics, the school will have to answer.” (Mellingsæter, 2017a).

In addition to the school being criticized for acting in line with his statement, the Minister has also been criticized for saying it. Sarromaa (2016) says that when the Minister of Education and Research defend the use of assistants and think it is unrealistic to replace them with teachers, he implies that the quality of special needs education cannot be that important.

The arguments in the debates mostly agree that assistants do not have satisfactory competence to carry out special needs education. In the instances where the arguments differ, it is mostly when an assistant was the best available option.

6.2.2 Resources

One of the factors that are mentioned often in relation to competence is the resources and capacity of the schools. The distribution, and often the lack of resources in special needs education is used in argumentation throughout the 35 articles in the sample. In one of her articles, Olaug Nilssen (2015b) describes that one of the reasons why they decided to enroll their son in a special needs school is the available resources. She says that the principal at the local school told her that they did not have either the competence or resources to offer her child, who has autism, an optimal solution. At the special needs school they enrolled him in they do not have to divide the available resources between children with and without special needs, she says. She also mentions that if a teacher is sick, the education is not compromised, as all the employees have the competency they need to step in. This has been an issue for others, where specialized teachers were on sick leave and substitutes without specialized training took over the teaching:

“Rita Lie points out that there has also been much long-term sick leave amongst the teachers.

- That was the worst because then they put in assistants or people completely without pedagogical competence to have the special needs education.” (Skogstrøm, 2016)

This parent also thinks the educational offer for her son has been inconsistent due to the substitutes not having an adequate qualification. Resources can be a source of inconsistency in other ways as well. In an earlier example, we saw how Daniel Lie struggled when the group he was in became much larger and included students with very different struggles. When he asked why this happened, he was told that the school did not have the economy for smaller groups (Skogstrøm, 2016).

As touched upon in the previous chapter, many argue that facilitated and individualized teaching in the classroom may be a better option than the system of special needs education today. Strengthening the general education by adapting to individual students has been on the political agenda since the early 2000s, but contrary to the original proposal, the special needs education as a separate branch was not removed (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). These measures also imply increasing the number of educators and the level of knowledge on the problematics and needs of the students. From the articles in the sample, it seems that the task of strengthening general education with more facilitated teaching is also affected by a lack of resources. As we have seen previously, students with behavioral issues have been removed from the class because of the strain on the teacher having the responsibility of too many

students in a class (Aftenposten, 2015). Interest organizations for disabled people call for more resources to have more teachers per student, increasing the capacity for adaptation to the students in the classroom. They think that the educational system in general needs a review from the Minister of Education and Research, not just the special needs education (Elvestad and Lerhol, 2016).

6.3 Content of the education

One of the reasons why some students receive special needs education is because they do not manage to follow the academic progression and content that is set out in the curriculum. This might be due to many reasons, such as learning difficulties, illness or behavioral issues. Some writers and commentators also argue that general education focuses too much on measurable achievements and performance in tests, making it hard for the teacher to be inclusive (Wernersen and Fjeld, 2016). It has already been shown in examples used elsewhere that some students have struggled after receiving special needs education. When they move on, either to another school, a higher grade or when it is found that a student has been misdiagnosed, they are often behind on their learning, according to what is considered appropriate for their age. This is also a concern for people who comment in the articles. They are worried that children in special needs education do not learn as much as they could, based on individual skills and abilities. The Children's Ombudsman at the time, Anne Lindboe, says in an interview that they have received concerns about the level of education from students and parents. Further, she says:

“The impression we have is that much of the teaching is without goals and purpose. Many of these children are cognitively very strong, but do not in any way get to utilize their potential.”
(Skogstrøm, 2016)

The UNCRC, which is implemented in Norway, emphasize that children have the right to education based on equal opportunities to reach their fullest potential (UNCRC 1989). This is also one of the goals of inclusive schools and was established in the Norwegian educational law in 1969, however, many argue that this goal has not been met (Askildt and Johnsen, 2004; Dalen and Ogden, 2017; Groven, 2013). In the articles, there are examples of such situations, describing the content of education.

The case where the school threatened to call the police if a young boy shows up at school is mentioned several times before. He has been receiving his education at an external location,

away from the school with two teachers. He thinks it is boring, and do not want to go to this place, and his mother describes how she struggled to convince her son to go. However, she does not always think it is entirely worth it. She says in the article:

“- One time he got there after I had nagged and nagged. When he got there, it was to play pool with the teacher. I noticed thinking «Is it worth it?» ” (Hansen, et al., 2014)

Earlier in the article, the local chief municipal education officer is interviewed and asked how it can be in the best interest of the child to reduce the amount of time he is taught, as the boy had three hours a day. He answers that the effect of the three hours might be better than a full day at the school and that he believes the content of the day is practically the same, and of the same quality as if he were in his class at school (ibid.). Whether the teacher intended to use the activity as an educational tool is not known. Ronny Nilsen (2016) also describe that he spent time in special needs education playing games. After being misdiagnosed with dyslexia, he was taken out of class, where he says he learned nothing. He says that for a year he only played games he learned nothing from, in addition to curricula he already had the year before. Daniel Lie has also explained that due to a lacking special needs measure he only learned to count and tell his name in English in four years. He needs more time to learn due to his dyslexia and to fill the gap when he started secondary school he spent much of his spare time studying (Skogstrøm, 2016).

In one of the articles from 2017 (Mellingsæter, 2017a), the mother of a student describes how she felt that her son's education was lacking at the school he went to previously. She shows the journalist one of the weekly plans he was given, showing that ten of the fifteen periods of the week there was no plan other than the student choosing what tasks he would work on. In the next article, published by the same journalist the day after, Nina Holmen, leader of an interest organization for people with ADHD says that they often get phone calls from parents wondering what goes on in the special needs education. These both relate to inclusion and content (Mellingsæter, 2017b).

Another boy writes that his homework plans were at the lowest level and he felt no pressure to learn at all. The way he writes makes it seem like someone said that he should not feel any pressure because it might become too much for him. However, when he found a learning technique that worked for him, he caught up to his classmates academically. He learned this not through special needs education, but by being in the school band (Oslo-gutt, 2015). In another article, an anonymous student concludes that removing content from the curriculum in

special needs education is not the same as adapting it. He points to methods for learning as a central factor and emphasize that a purely theoretical way of teaching will not appeal to all students (Elev, 2016). He is one of two students in high school who are concerned about the curriculum. The other high school student Hilding describes in an interview that in primary and secondary school, his education was facilitated and that he had some teaching outside the class, which worked well for him. However, he now struggles through some classes, as he is required to learn a third language to pass high school. He says that there are very few who have facilitation in high school, and he has only had the opportunity to have a few of his tests orally so far. Other than this, he has to do exactly the same as every other student, which he thinks is too hard for him due to his dyslexia (Baugstø, 2015). The first student has similar problems, and writes:

“Until now, high school has been very tough. There are no traditions for facilitation, alternative tests or smaller groups. Every facilitation we get is a fight to get the school and teachers to understand.” (Elev, 2016)

In the first article in the sample, it is described that some students do better in a special needs school. In the school that is described, Bakkeåsen, they have classes that are not included in other schools, such as a class called ‘social competence’, where they discuss topics such as ethics, relating to everyday life (Svarstad, 2014). While this might be an important addition to the curriculum for students struggling with this kind of competence, it might come at the cost of other classes that are necessary to graduate from the educational system in Norway. The anonymous student above also stated that he got holes in his education from attending a special needs school, which became apparent when he returned to the general educational system (Elev, 2016). It is often stated throughout the sample that one of the problems in education is that the theoretical level is too high to include all students. At the special needs school in the first article, they divide the day, having theoretical classes in the first half and practical classes after lunch (Svarstad, 2014). As we have seen, it has been argued that the special schools are not run by the state, but rather are local measures in special needs education. This will most likely also mean that there is a variation in the ‘quality’ of these schools. Seeing that some students do better in a special needs school and some do not, it raises the question of whether this is due to a variation in these schools, or if there is an individual variation of whether the student will thrive or not. Sarromaa (2015) argues that there are indeed ‘good and bad’ special schools. She also states that the quality of the arrangements is the most central part of the education, considering the individual variation in

deciding what school a student with special educational needs should attend. It might be in the best interest of the students attending Bakkeåsen, but not the best option for the student who returned to a general education school.

6.4 Inclusion as a tool for social learning?

Combining the topics of inclusion/exclusion and content, Sarromaa (2015) and Nilssen (2015b) question whether the inclusion of the ‘abnormal’ students might be used as a tool in teaching the ‘normal’ students’ social diversity – at the cost of their educational needs. Sarromaa (2015) distinguish the terms *inclusion* and *integration*, stating that integrating a student into a class does not necessarily mean social or academic inclusion. As a politician, she visited a school in her district and noticed a student sitting alone in the back of the classroom while the rest of the class was in the front. She describes him as having complex educational difficulties. He is working on an iPad, like the rest of the class, but there is no interaction with the other students or the teacher. Using this example, she concludes that if the social relations and content are absent, students with special educational needs “may just as well be in their own rooms or attend their own schools. They should not be there just for show!” (Sarromaa, 2015). She clarifies that all students have individual needs, and that special needs education and schools may be the right solution for many students. Her point is that integration should benefit all the students involved, and not be for the ‘normal’ students to learn about diversity (ibid.).

While Olaug Nilssen (2015a and 2015b) criticized Sarromaa for her article, they do somewhat agree. Nilssen’s main disagreement concerns the basis of her examples, emphasizing that drawing conclusions about complex issues based on a short visit at a school may give an incomplete picture of the situation. She says that not all students necessarily have the same goals in the lessons and that they cannot always do all the same things as the rest of the students. An important aspect of inclusion, according to Nilssen, is that the children thrive and do well, and if they do not, being in smaller groups or attending a special needs school might be a better option for the individual student. She also thinks an important part of ensuring competent adults is to teach children about diversity and generosity and that this should be a natural part of schooling. Continuing, she reflects:

“The children should learn generosity and diversity, and some will be care workers, but they should not be that as children. There are limits to what one can demand that they manage to

show an understanding of, and there are limits to what adults can decide about their friendships and relations.” (Nilssen, 2015b)

They agree that special needs institutions may be a good alternative for some students and that integration does not always lead to inclusion. They also agree that children with disabilities and special educational needs should not be used as a tool in the education of children that are considered to fit into general education.

6.5 The major themes summarized

This analytical chapter has focused on the main topics of concern in the debates concerning special needs education in newspapers between 2014 and 2017. A thorough analysis of the articles provides patterns and similarities in situations and experiences within the categories of inclusion, exclusion, competence, and content. These topics are related in many ways, which can be seen in the examples, where some articles are used to exemplify several of the topics in this chapter as well as chapter 5.

The first part of this chapter looks at the experiences and notions of exclusion and inclusion. The common goal of inclusion is either full or partial participation in the general class, students being engaged with their peers. However, there are several examples of separation and even isolation of students considered to have ‘special needs’. In the examples of isolation, the boys that are described are considered to have behavioral issues to such an extent that they are either seen as a threat to other students or staff or as too disruptive to be in a larger class. While adults often are the ones to raise concerns and represent the children and young in these cases, they are included in the story through small parts of interviews or comments explaining parts of their point of view. Included in the articles are also professionals and other adults, who talk about the implications social exclusion might have for the children. Consequences such as a lack of social competence and notions of normality are also discussed.

Further, it is shown that many are concerned about who is teaching the students, especially when they are out of the class. There are many concerns and descriptions of assistants and other educators without enough competence in special needs education are responsible for the teaching of students who struggle in the educational system. Inconsistency and quality are major concerns, as some students experience gaps in their knowledge after having special needs education. In some instances, groups that are taught by educators without expertise on the problematics are called ‘storage groups’, and some are concerned that the education of

children that outside the norm is not considered equally important to the students that fit into the educational system. Resources is one of the aspects that affect this situation, as even the Minister of Education and Research argues that replacing all assistants with competent teachers is not realistic. Many also reflect that a lack of resources is one of the reasons the goal of facilitated learning for all children within the classroom is not being met.

Related to both exclusion, inclusion and the competence of educators is the last major topic; the content of the education. Many cases describe that the children in special needs education do not have the opportunity to get the level of education they could have, based on their fullest potential. As discussed in the previous chapter, a diagnosis can contribute to generalizing the potential of students in special needs education, not accounting for individual variations. Examples show that students sometimes spend much time on activities that are experienced as unrelated to the curriculum, such as playing games or making waffles instead of having 'regular lectures'. As seen in the examples, there are also students who have changed schools and even being integrated back into the class, who discover how much of the education they have missed, having to work very hard to catch up. For some, facilitated and special needs education has worked well, but when starting high school, they experience a new reality without facilitation and adaptation to individual needs, making them struggle to keep up with the content of the curriculum.

In the next chapter, the topics of the previous chapters will be discussed further in relation to each other and the research questions that are the foundation of this study. The topics will also be discussed in relation to a broader educational and political context. In addition, the ways the media can be used by different actors to shed light on situations and tendencies in society, and the possible implications this might have will be looked upon.

Chapter 7:

Discussion

In the previous chapters, many different aspects of the debates on special needs education in Norway have been examined. The 35 articles in the sample feature 77 contributors – individuals who are present either by writing pieces, interviews, or comments. The main topics that are discussed are exclusion, inclusion, competence, and content. In this chapter, the various aspects will be discussed in relation to each other. Drawing on the aims of the research, it will discuss the ways that special needs education and the students that are considered to need it are talked about in the sample. Further, the roles of journalists, the media and expert contributors will be considered. It will also be connected to a broader educational and political context.

The first topic of the chapter will be the use of media to enlighten issues and the power relations that are involved. Second, it will discuss narratives and representation, looking at the ways children and young are presented and represented in the debates. The last part of the chapter considers the major topics of the debates discussed in chapter 5 in relation to perspectives on disability and educational policies.

7.1 Media and power relations

As we have seen, most of the cases present some critique of general and special needs education. Tendencies and situations that have had a negative impact on students in special needs education are brought up. While some cases portray a happy ending for the students, saying that the problems have been solved, the main portion of the sample is in some way presenting something in special needs education that does not work the way it should. The main concerns that are described are the exclusion and isolation of some students and the level of education that is received in special needs education. The level of education relates to concerns about the educators and their competence in special educational needs, what the students do when they are at school, and whether or not the education fulfills the educational goals, policies and laws.

There are no articles in the sample that are exclusively positive. Examples and descriptions are given of positive measures, such as a ‘dyslexia friendly school’ in Oslo, but they are

always followed by a notion of something that is seen as wrong or inadequate in the educational system. In addition, a lot of information is given in the articles. Numbers, statistics and facts are provided, even though in many cases there are no references to where this information is found. Research papers and reports are sometimes mentioned or referred to, also providing comments from the researchers or people responsible, such as Marie-Lisbet Amundsen and the Children's Ombudsman. This research that is referred to is also exemplified in the articles and bring up some of the problematics that are discussed in the debates, providing credibility to the stories and examples that are told, showing that these situations are not only found in the media. However, the amount of information that is provided can make it difficult for the reader to consider the stories that are not presented in the media (Eide, 2005a). While it is not the aim of this thesis to analyze the experiences with the educational system, it is vital to remember that not all students and their parents have had negative encounters with it, or with special needs education. It has already been pointed out that there are aspects of special needs education that works well for the students in the sample, showing that measures do not always have a negative impact. However, the narrative that is presented is that many students and parents struggle with the educational system and that there are practices with serious implications that need to change. The media has much power of definition. They can offer conceptualizations on 'the others' and how to relate to them. In addition, what is written is often built on polarization, brutality, and intensification. Media, especially mass media, rarely report on everyday happenings (Eide, 2005b). Presenting negative cases in the media thus help to bring attention to matters that concern people who are involved with them, and to inspire a will for political action and change.

Many parents think that the relation to public services is one of the most challenging aspects of having a child with disability (Tøssebro, 2010). In many of the articles, there are expressions of frustration from people with different roles, including both children and adults, when they describe their relations with the educational system. Bringing a story to the media might be a way for people who struggle to be seen and to emphasize the severity of a situation if they feel that their concerns are not being taken seriously (Eide, 2005b). Some of the people that we have seen in the examples in chapters five and six have had issues with the educational system for some time. Some students have changed schools several times due to their issues, parents have had long struggles with not being involved in the decision-making regarding their children, and some bring up general issues of which they are affected, such as a lack of special needs measures in high schools compared to earlier education.

In chapter 5, the use of young people's voices for a rhetorical purpose was discussed. Citations and parts from interviews with children and young are used at the beginning and end of articles written by journalists, and the middle part often consists of comments by experts or professionals. These comments often speak to a tendency rather than the specific case, or the educational system and special needs education as a whole. Bringing in experts for interviews or comments speak to the power of definition and language. Expert language is one of the power-languages that are most tolerated and accepted. They speak in terms that can sometimes be more difficult to understand, but this is accepted because they have the expertise, and sometimes have to use specific language and terms to explain and analyze. Experts also have resources and knowledge that can give them power over others (Börjesson and Rehn, 2009). The experts who comment in the sample do not use particularly 'difficult' language, but their opinions bear meaning and importance in the articles. The language in the comments from experts is however different from the language in the comments from most of the children and youth that are included. In the comments, the students talk about their experiences and memories, and experts use facts and research. One way to interpret this is that the experts talk about special needs education and children who are considered to need it from an impersonal and maybe objective point of view. Comments from students and parents can be seen as a way to personify what the experts say about the situations and practices that are of concern, making the article easier to relate to as a reader. It can also be the other way around. Cases and situations are brought to a journalist, who include expert comments to show that this is not just one single problem, but a larger tendency in the educational system.

In one of the articles in the sample (Isaksen, 2016), the Minister for Education and Research respond to an article written by an anonymous student a few days earlier (Elev, 2016). The student aimed his piece directly at the Minister, criticizing the lack of facilitation in high school and suggests how teaching could be improved to include students who struggle with a very theoretically oriented curriculum. In his reply, the Minister says that the opinions and experiences of children and young are important to politicians. However, before saying this, he also says that the student is *courageous* in his honesty about his issues, and by sharing them. But why do students have to be courageous to share their experiences publicly? Does it have something to do with why many of the articles are written with a retrospect view? Do students also have a fear of repercussion from talking about their experiences publicly? It is difficult to draw conclusions on this from the articles in the debates.

7.2 Narratives

Narratives are stories that come from experiences people make from events. And within this theory, people do not only have, but they also are narratives. The stories that others tell and that we tell about ourselves affect our identity and self-image, making it possible to affect other people. They are also situational; what we tell about ourselves depends on how we want to be seen in different contexts (Kvvelo, 2013).

As seen both in chapters 5 and 6, children and youth do have opportunities to voice their opinions in the debates on special needs education in Norwegian online newspapers. Their voices are shown in two ways in the sample; either through writing about their experiences in Aftenpostens' column 'Si;D', or by being featured through interviews in articles written by journalists. Children and youth can be found in 13 of the 35 articles, and five of these are written by them. When children and young write about their experiences, they show their agency, their capability of having an understanding of their surroundings and participating as social actors (Robson, Bell and Klocker, 2007). They control their narrative and are able to portray their experiences the way they intend to. So, students are included in the debates, but how do the other contributors talk about them and special needs education?

In the articles that are not written by children or youth, they are not fully able to control their narrative. As discussed earlier, journalists have the editorial power and are creating the main narratives. In many of the articles, the children and young are in some ways portrayed as vulnerable victims. Especially in the articles concerning specific cases and students, the comments of the students provide their experiences and memories, but rarely their perspectives on the situation or the structures that have caused it. Whether or not they are asked about this in the interviews or provide comments on it to the journalist is unknown, but it is not included in the majority of the articles. The main exception is a high-school student, Hilding, who point to what would work better for him in his education (Baugstø, 2015). The situations that the students in special needs education are in is affecting them, but often, the parents are the ones who are portrayed as struggling with the educational system and public services. They are the ones who fight to change the situation on behalf of the student. The parents also represent their children in many articles, often reciting what their children have told them about their experiences as well as providing their own. And most likely, the parents are the ones who decided to contact the media about the situation their child is in, or are contacted by journalists. The journalists do not necessarily intend to signalize that minority groups such as children and people with disabilities are not able to voice their opinions or talk

about their situations. However, some argue that this prioritization might be due to a notion of who it will be easiest to talk to about the situation, and not the capability (Eide, 2005a).

One of the major topics of the debates is exclusion. We have seen that separating and isolating children who are considered to have special educational needs happens and that this tendency is found outside the articles as well. Exclusion and separation are seen as classical techniques of power, and it creates a notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It can generate both positive and negative associations (Börjesson and Rehn, 2009). In addition to power, othering processes are related to normality and narratives. When we create notions of who we are, we also imply who we are not. Disability is often seen as an abnormality, and different perspectives on disability also play into the narratives. Holt (2004) argues that the individual tragedy model has parallels to the focus on individual learning. When students do not fulfill the expectations of their age, the school can intervene through special needs education. The individual has a problem, and there is a need to reduce it, and thus, the disability becomes part of the students’ identity in school. Through receiving special needs education and diagnoses, the students are categorized as others, different and abnormal. In the cases of separation in the sample, it is most often argued that it is in the best interest of the child to be in a smaller group. However, an alternate explanation is that teachers have the power to separate children from the class:

“It can be argued that the true obstacles to inclusion are in the attitudes of teachers and other school professionals; the reason behind all segregated educational arrangements is based on the teachers’ need to remove the students that the teachers themselves find disruptive or tiresome from ordinary classes” (Vehmas, 2015:56).

It is argued further that this is supported by psychologists and doctors who provide diagnoses as a justification for the separation. Tøssebro (2010) talks about medicalization; explaining human variation in medical and diagnostic terms. As noted earlier, diagnoses are frequently mentioned throughout the sample. There are notions of both positive and negative experiences with getting a diagnose, some experience it as stigmatizing, while some feel that their struggles are finally explained and easier to relate to. Medicalization is still common in schools, and it is argued that it makes it easier for parents to accept that special needs education is a good option for their children (Vehmas, 2015). From the examples presented earlier, it is also shown that the school has the authority to do tests on the students, effectively diagnosing them. In the instance that was shown, it was explained that the diagnosis turned out to be wrong. The student explained that he was categorized by having dyslexia and received education in a group after getting the diagnosis. Separation of students and

diagnoses, therefore, play a part in the narratives about children considered to have special educational needs. However, while the categorizations can affect the way adults perceive children, it does not always affect their self-image. In the sample, one of the students who was isolated due to behavioral issues is asked if he is dangerous to other students. He replies:

“I don’t think my friends see me as dangerous, [...]” (Hansen, et al., 2014)

This student does not speak to whether or not he is dangerous, but of how he thinks his peers perceive him. The school created a narrative of the student as dangerous, while the article instead portrays him as a victim of unjust actions.

7.3 The topics of concern

The main topics of concern that can be found in the articles are inclusion, exclusion, competence, and content in special needs education. As described in chapter 2, the quality of education was questioned by politicians in the early 2000s. It was suggested that special needs education would be replaced by a strengthening of general education to accommodate more students. Many argued against this, and the final decision was to gradually go from special needs education to facilitated teaching. This would be done through early efforts towards students who struggle and thus reducing the need for special needs education as a separate measure (Dalen and Ogden, 2017). In the sample, the arguments on how to solve issues of separating students from their classes, educators without adequate competence and differences in learning outcome, point to a need for facilitated teaching. Solutions such as a larger number of teachers and a more practically oriented curriculum are mentioned frequently. Many point to this as a goal to further the inclusion of all students in the educational system. However, it is not pointed out to be an established part of educational policy. This means that the major concerns that are discussed in the debates are part of a structure that is meant to be phased out. It is pointed out by several people that a lack of, or imbalanced distribution of resources is one of the reasons why special needs education is not optimal. Could this be a consequence of the aim to strengthen general education?

In terms of the perspectives on disability, the way special needs education is described by the many contributors is not following one specific model. Through the separation and medicalization of students, special needs education can be seen as one of the measures that are in place to reduce or remove the individual problem. The structure is in place to ensure

education for disabled students from the perspective of the individual tragedy model. From the social perspective, the categorization of students is what causes the disability. A segregating system contributes to the notion of disability, without special needs education, are there students with special educational needs? From a constructionist point of view, special needs education is more complicated. Within this model, disability is considered relational and constructed through the relation between the individual and society. While it is recognized that people have impairments and struggles, they are also affected by discrimination and marginalization. Thus, special needs education can be seen as both a positive and a negative measure. It aims to provide equal opportunity to education to students who struggle in education, but at the same time, it contributes to the process of othering and notions of abnormality. All of these notions of special needs education can be seen in the sample, presented in different ways by the different contributors.

While moving towards facilitated teaching is a step towards a relational understanding of disability, and away from categorization and separation, the idea of disability as an individual problem is still present. The Minister of Education and Research talks about ‘early efforts’ as a measure to identify the struggles of students at an early stage (Isaksen, 2016). This indicates that there are still notions of what constitutes a ‘normal’ student, based on age-specific expectations of development and knowledge. While Torbjørn Røe Isaksen is not the Minister of Education and Research anymore, the work towards early efforts is still an ongoing political aim in education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019).

Chapter 8:

Concluding summary

In this thesis, the debates on special needs education in 35 Norwegian online newspapers between 2014 and 2017 have been examined. Through perspectives from the social studies of children and childhood and constructionism, the different aspects of the debates have been analyzed and explained.

There are many people with different roles and professions involved in the debates. Perspectives and opinions from journalists, politicians, professors, researchers, parents, students, and other interested people have been shown in the articles. However, it has also been shown that some of the people who work with special needs education are not represented and some of the reasons why have been explored. Earlier cases show that educators might risk their jobs by expressing their opinions about the educational system publicly. This fear of repercussion has also been seen as a possible reason as to why many articles are written retrospectively.

Children and youth are present and represented in different ways. They contribute to the debates as social agents capable of understanding their situations in the educational system, but they are also presented as victims of a segregating system. They are spoken for by both their parents and journalists as they recount what they have said earlier about their experiences. Their experiences and perspectives can also be argued to be used for a rhetorical purpose. Citations are used to emphasize the severity of a tendency or situation explained by other adults and experts such as researchers and professors. And while students are struggling, the adults are mostly the ones fighting for the system to change and suggesting how it could or should be. It is recognized that parents do struggle on behalf of their children, as they are met with arrogance and a lack of information from public services and schools. However, including children and young in newspaper articles help to personify critique of a system, but at the same time, it allows a few individuals to speak on behalf of a group unable to control the narrative.

Perspectives on disability also affect the way special needs education and the students who are considered to need it are talked about. Mainly, there are three common models of disability that are visible in the debates. The individual tragedy model presents disability as an

individual problem that can be solved or reduced. This relates to the use of diagnoses and can have implications for children in terms of separating normal from abnormal through exclusion and separation in education. The social model argues that disability comes from society, as a society, in this case, special needs education creates the notion of disability. The constructionist model combines the two perspectives and emphasizes that disability is relational and complex. It argues that both the impairment and structures contribute to the notion of disability, and those who argue from this perspective often argue that special needs education should be replaced with facilitated teaching that will account for the individual variations that are found in a class.

The major topics of concern, inclusion, exclusion, competence, and content have different implications both socially and academically for the students. They are discussed both by children and adults in the debates. However, suggestions of how to change the tendencies point more to a long-term shift in the educational system than how to make special needs education better. The topics are discussed through examples and tendencies showing that the matters do have implications for both social and academic inclusion for the students. It is pointed out that many students are separated from their class to receive an education that is supposed to suit their needs. However, students and parents experience that they are educated by educators without competence on the problematics that the students have. In addition, they also argue that the content of special needs education is not always the same as for students who are not considered to have special educational needs. Many of these problems are attributed to a lack of resources in this part of education.

While it can be concluded that special needs education does affect the social and academic inclusion of the students, it is difficult to conclude how. The articles show that it can have both positive and negative significations in children's experiences in school. For some students, special needs education has a positive effect, but in the articles, the emphasis is mainly on the negative aspects.

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