

# Inclusive Education for Students With Special Education Needs in Norway

 Remedial and Special Education  
1–8

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DOI: 10.1177/07419325241260750

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## Abstract

This narrative review aims to present and discuss the Norwegian school system as a context for inclusive education. Despite its clear political intentions, Norway lacks a common definition of inclusion and has limited insight into the quality of inclusive practices that are commonly implemented for students with special education needs (SEN) and the results of such practices. This study reveals that students with SEN are often educated in segregated settings and by staff lacking educational competence. Hence, future policy actions should prioritize the development of a common terminology and a report system that includes students with SEN. As SEN resources in Norway are allocated based on a lack of satisfactory learning outcomes from mainstream education and often result in segregated actions, an increased focus on school society, learning environments, educational practices, and individual learning outcomes is required. Additional research is needed to identify practices that can promote high-quality inclusion of students in Norwegian schools.

## Keywords

inclusion, education, mainstream school, diversity, special education

Inclusion is a worldwide fundamental human right (UNESCO, 1994). Historically, the concept of inclusion began to gain predominance in school policies across nations in the late 1980s. It gradually supplanted the policy of integration that, through the 1950s and 1960s, had called attention to the presence of students with special needs in a target school (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2019). Today, the principle of inclusion is widely accepted and encompasses all students (Haug, 2017). However, there is no internationally agreed-upon definition of the term. Thus, several interpretations of the concept exist (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023).

Based on an extensive summary of approximately 3,000 studies conducted around the world, Mitchell and Sutherland (2020) operationalized inclusive education with the following formula: Vision + Placement + 5As (adapted curriculum, adapted assessment, adapted teaching, acceptance, and access) + Support + Resources + Leadership. From this operationalization, inclusion can be understood as a multifaceted fundamental principle that encompasses several decision levels and school development processes as well as daily social and academic practices at school. However, one aim of schooling is to fulfil the human's right to education, including the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies (United Nations, 1948). Thus, it is notable that students' learning outcomes, which have been recognized as an important part of inclusive education in several

earlier scientific articles (see Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2021; Farrell, 2004; Strømstad et al., 2004), have been somewhat neglected by Mitchell and Sutherland (2020). The fact that existing research cannot seem to agree on what constitutes inclusive education, and as such which indicators are appropriate for measuring inclusive education, it may be challenging to rigorously assess the quality of inclusion in schools.

The principle of inclusion as a fundamental human right should find favorable consideration in Norway, as it was one of the first European countries that establish laws for inclusive education (Nes et al., 2018) and is among the richest nations globally, allocating the second-highest number of economic resources per student at the primary school level (OECD, 2023). Researchers have, however, identified substantial gaps between ideals and reality in terms of

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inclusion in Norwegian schools (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Haug, 2017). Studies exploring educational practices have, for example, reported that a significant proportion of the education of students with special education needs (SEN) is provided in segregated settings outside mainstream classrooms (Engevik et al., 2016; Østvik et al., 2017; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Furthermore, the magnitude of economic resources spent on education is not necessarily associated with students' learning outcomes (OECD, 2022; UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, it is valuable to investigate inclusion in the Norwegian context in greater detail.

The aim of this narrative review is to present and discuss the Norwegian primary and secondary school system in the context of inclusion. We describe the results of previous Norwegian studies investigating inclusive practices for students with SEN and discuss the consequences of these findings in the Norwegian context. Finally, we identify several potential paths forward in the process toward achieving high-quality inclusion.

## The Norwegian (Education) System's Underpinning of Inclusive Practices

Norway is governed at three levels: the state, the county, and the municipality. Municipal-level governments are mainly responsible for primary and lower secondary education. School leaders and teachers develop local curriculum plans based on the national curriculum, and individual teachers exercise autonomy when implementing both the national curriculum and the schools' local plans (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).

Municipalities are primarily economically responsible for the schools and generate income through taxes and fees. Education expenditure varies across local authorities, mainly due to student numbers and settlement patterns in each municipality (Meld. St. 21, 2016–2017). At the school level, the school leader is responsible for the school budget within the framework established by the municipality. According to the Norwegian Education Mirror (2020), 37% of local authorities spend between NOK 100,000 and 130,000 per student, and 79% of students live in these municipalities. A total of 62% of municipalities spend more than NOK 130,000 per student, and 19% of students live in these municipalities.

The current Norwegian Education Act, enacted in 1998, gives all children the same statutory right to 10 years of compulsory education (from age 6 to 16) free of charge. Furthermore, the Act states that the overarching principles guiding the Norwegian school system are equitable, inclusive, and adapted education (Education Act, 1998). Equitable education entails that all students have access to the same quality of education and opportunities to learn—both individually and collaboratively—without being disadvantaged by individual and sociocultural factors or

systemic barriers and biases. This requires the implementation of differentiated interventions rather than uniform interventions (NOU 2009: 18).

Inclusive education, the primary interest of this article, is clearly stated as a principle in central documents (e.g., Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017); despite this, Norwegian school policy has not provided a single, unified description or common operationalization of the term. It has been described in different ways within and across school documents. In a content component analysis of the most recent curriculum for primary education in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017), Faldet et al. (2022) identified diversity, participation, and democracy as the most frequently employed concepts related to inclusion. In line with this, certain policy documents have mandated that every student should have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a community of students that promote diversity, respect, and understanding (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Furthermore, inclusion involves the student's fostering of a sense of natural belongingness, a feeling of security and importance, and the ability to participate in decision-making about their own learning and learning environment (Meld. St. 6, 2019–2020). This includes addressing the unique needs of individual students, including those with disabilities, and providing appropriate support to help them succeed academically and socially.

Adapted education is a central tool for realizing the goal of equitable and inclusive education (Haug, 2020). It involves developing schools to accommodate all students while considering the individual and social differences among them (Education Act, 1998, §1–3; Haug, 2020). Adapted education is thus an overarching principle that applies to all students at all levels of education. Within the framework of mainstream education, this piece of legislation specifies that adaptation should not manifest as individualized accommodations, but rather as adjustments to curricula and teaching methods to match the diversity of the students' backgrounds and prerequisites within classroom environments.

## Inclusive Education and Students With SEN

In 2023, there were 606,065 students enrolled in public and 30,986 students enrolled in private primary and lower secondary schools in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2023). Students who cannot obtain satisfactory competence goal outcomes through adapted mainstream education have the right to special education and an individual education plan (IEP; Education Act, 1998, §5–1). As such, decisions on special education services in Norway are not based on diagnoses (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). In line with this, Gøranson et al. (2020) provided a

detailed description of the procedure leading to the right of special education in Norway.

A total of 8.1% of primary and secondary students received special education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024). Students with SEN are subject to the same overarching legislation and receive support from their local schools. The prevailing policy advocates for special education to occur within classroom settings at local schools alongside peers. However, parents retain the option to apply for or accept alternative educational arrangements (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2019), and students who have reached the age of 15 can make decisions on matters concerning their education themselves (Children Act, 1982, §31–33; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014). Despite a decreasing trend in the number of students in Norwegian schools receiving special education in segregated settings, about 48% still receive special education outside the mainstream classroom (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023b). This constitutes a deviation from both the Norwegian policy and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which dictates that special education should primarily take place within the framework of mainstream education. The Civil Society Coalition Norway United Nations Report (2019) suggests that there are several barriers to realizing inclusive education for students with SEN, such as geographical variations in the implementation of educational rights, school accessibility, and the fact that many students with SEN do not achieve satisfactory learning outcomes.

One factor that might contribute to these barriers is the level and type of pedagogical competence among the staff who work with students with SEN. In Norway, there are no clear special education competency requirements for special education teachers. Approximately, 50% of the students entitled to special education receive their educational support from teacher assistants who usually lack formal competency in both education and SEN (Nordahl & Ekspertgruppen for Barn og Unge med Behov for Særskilt Tilrettelegging, 2018) and thus do not fulfill the competency requirement for teaching (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023b).

## Research on the Inclusion of Students With SEN in Norway

Two recent reviews delved into the inclusion of students with SEN in Nordic schools (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2022). Buli-Holmberg et al. (2023) included 34 studies (6 from Norway—in one of these studies, another country was also involved) in their qualitative literature review. The authors concluded that across countries, existing studies were mainly qualitative and only defined inclusion and inclusive education to a limited extent. The fundamental areas of interest in the included studies were

human rights and democratic principles, the placement of students with SEN, participation and belongingness, and high-quality learning for all students. The authors stated that the review provided little knowledge about how to transform the idea of inclusion into instructional practices.

Keles et al. (2022) conducted a systematic scoping review of 135 studies (38 from Norway), to investigate (a) the characteristics of empirical studies on the inclusion of students with SEN, (b) the perspectives and understandings of inclusion and SEN referred to by the authors, and (c) which inclusive pedagogical approaches and practices were referred to by the authors. Keles et al. (2022) concluded that, across countries, few studies have reported evidence on whether inclusive practices work, nor have they reliably identified practices of inclusion. Thus, according to the authors, it is difficult to identify how inclusive environments are created. The authors also highlighted the absence of a mutual understanding of inclusion and the need for more studies on students' voices and the perspectives of school personnel and families on the topic of inclusion.

In addition to the two aforementioned reviews, a narrative review addressing inclusion emphasized Norwegian education and special education policy and practices (Fasting, 2010, p. 179). Fasting discussed the challenges in achieving inclusive education in Norway due to contradictory ideological principles: While inclusive education is broadly associated with promoting participation and equality in inclusive learning communities, a narrower view of inclusion links the concept to adapted education, differentiation, and optimization through individualized education. Furthermore, Fasting highlighted a shift toward accountability and academic learning, leading to increased special education enrolment and segregated part-time measures for students who cannot meet curriculum demands. In line with this, he noted an overreliance on test results and grades as indicators of school success and advocated for a broader focus on objectives that foster participation, growth, and development. Unlike more recent reviews, Fasting's review study did not explicitly address how inclusive practices are implemented with students.

Although there is limited knowledge on educational practices from these previous reviews, information can be derived from individual empirical studies and reports published in recent years. Findings from a parental survey ( $N = 262$ ) conducted by Wendelborg and Tøssebro (2011) that focused on students with disabilities, 11 to 13 years of age, attending mainstream schools in Norway indicated that the time allocated to special education and interaction with teacher assistants directly impacted their social participation in school. Intellectual development was related to the number of hours spent in special education. The type and severity of disability exerted only an indirect effect on social participation. However, it is important to note that the study did not control for students' access to expressive

language/communication, which could potentially influence the results significantly (see e.g., Engevik et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the authors' results indicated that, as a group, students with SEN may be particularly vulnerable to exclusion.

In another empirical study, Bachmann et al. (2016) provided a comprehensive description of educational practices, concluding that students with SEN had limited potential for learning in mainstream education. This conclusion was drawn from data derived through observations of 159 students showing limited participation in academic discussions, and engagement in terms of listening to their teachers and completing assignments individually or with peers. In addition, adapted tasks and teaching aids were used minimally, and there was limited support in mainstream education settings compared to small group settings. Data from the same project also indicated limited collaboration concerning the education of students with disabilities, both between special education teachers and class teachers and between special education teachers and teacher assistants. Bachmann et al. (2016) showed that simply being present in mainstream classroom settings is not satisfactory to succeed in inclusion. It also requires inclusive practices within the classroom. Factors such as limited collaboration among staff members (Nilsen, 2020), teacher workloads (Wendelborg et al., 2017), frequent use of teaching assistants without educational competence (Engevik et al., 2016; Nordahl & Ekspertgruppen for Barn og Unge med Behov for Særskilt Tilrettelegging, 2018), and the lack of relevant educational resources developed for students in need of simplified learning content (Bakken & Næss, in press), in conjunction with individual student factors such as language ability (Engevik et al., 2016), may relate to the quality of inclusive practices, and the learning possibilities that students are given (Engevik et al., 2016). The outcome measure chosen to evaluate students' learning and benefit may also influence the results.

An interview study involving one leader from the municipal school management, one from primary school, and one from middle school from three different municipalities revealed that these leaders primarily focused on competency development, following up on students' learning outcomes, and strategies related to strengthening adapted education (Knudsmoen et al., 2022). These findings appear to contradict the experiences detailed by students and parents regarding activities of low academic relevance in the Ombudsperson's (2017) report titled "Without Aim and Purpose" (our translation). Notably, Knudsmoen et al. (2022) focused on students in general and not specifically on students with SEN. Thus, these school leaders' focus may differ across student groups, and disparities might exist between school leaders' intentions and the experiences of students and parents.

When evaluating the implemented education offer for students with SEN, it is essential to note that these students

often do not receive the support and teaching resources they are entitled to due to the absence of school staff. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SEN resources were withdrawn when the classroom teacher was sick or as a result of home-schooling (Folgerø, 2023). Moreover, a useful official registration system for the education offer given to students with SEN is non-existent (Forvaltningsrevisjon Tønsberg kommune, 2022). Today, the national registration system collects limited data on the quality of special education given to students with SEN (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023e). A registration system that collects data on the content of IEPs, instructional practices, learning outcomes, experiences of well-being, the amount of special education given/withdrawn etc. for each student with SEN may have been highly beneficial to track educational pathways and, consequently, benefit of education (NOU 2018: 15, p. 187). The absence of an official registration system may limit the knowledge, quality, and degree of inclusive practices for students with SEN in schools over time. This dearth of data on educational practices for students with SEN in Norwegian schools, coupled with the lack of a comprehensive system to document their educational pathways, has created a significant gap in our understanding of these students' current situations (Næss & Moljord, 2019).

## Next Steps for Policy, Practice, and Research

Based on Norwegian public documents, inclusion should have been fulfilled in line with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). However, drawing on the existing reviews, individual empirical studies, and official reports presented above, it is evident that there is a lack of a common theoretical understanding and terminology of inclusion (Knudsmoen et al., 2022), and an ideological approach has gained predominance (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2022). This situation results in a pressing necessity to establish a clear underlying theory of inclusion, a precise definition of the concept, and its operationalization (see Knudsmoen et al., 2022). Such clarifications can be crucial for several reasons. First, they can contribute to supporting schools and educators in their endeavor to translate inclusion into tangible actions within the realm of teaching. Second, they can ensure compliance with regulations and policies in practical educational settings. Third, they can serve to delineate the specific knowledge and competencies required by school staff, teacher education candidates, and students themselves within the educational environment. Finally, it may be valuable to evaluate how Norwegian schools successfully include students with SEN in educational settings to improve action plans for inclusion and to develop criteria for evaluation of inclusive practices.

The attention given to inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, as observed in the Norwegian reviews

on inclusion, this article, and this special issue, may be deemed contradictory to the ideology expressed in Norwegian public-school documents. When framing the question of the inclusion and/or inclusive practices of specific target students or student group, rather than fostering inclusive school communities, there is a potential contradiction with the core idea of inclusion. The concept of inclusion was originally introduced to embrace the diversity of all students and replace the term integration, aiming to break down divisions within the school community (Tøssebro & Wendelborg, 2019). Specifically, the focus might shift toward fitting in or integrating someone into the community, diminishing the emphasis on the reciprocity and the value of diversity that is the focus of inclusion (Haug, 2017). Therefore, the specificity in the language used when someone talks about and discusses inclusion is highly relevant and of even more significance than discussing inclusion in general terms.

A primarily ideological approach, as seen in the above-mentioned reviews, may give rise to certain expectations. However, students with SEN are frequently excluded from quality assurance processes in Norwegian schools. Mandatory national test results may not necessarily encompass results from students with SEN, as it is at the discretion of the school to grant exceptions to taking the test (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023a). Furthermore, Norway does not have a common national test regime for students with SEN or a system to evaluate the education that students with SEN are given (NOU 2016: 17); we do not have a national tier system with systematic tests, assessments, and interventions for these students. This may make it hard for staff members to make the necessary adaptations for each student. In line with this, it has been suggested that not much is expected of students with SEN (NOU 2023: 13). Parents have clearly stated that the school needs to emphasize learning outcomes instead of “trips and waffle pedagogy”—a teaching approach that includes activities unrelated to the goals outlined in the curriculum (Sagen, 2011; Ombudsperson for Children in Norway, 2017). Few national actions have been taken to address the limited focus on learning outcomes for this group of students since a 2017 report from the Ombudsperson for Children. One exception is the national initiative called “Competence enhancement for special education and inclusive practices,” which is currently being implemented over a 5-year period from 2020 to 2024. The aim of this initiative is to improve the skills of leaders, teachers, and the support systems to deliver adapted and inclusive education from kindergarten to upper secondary school. As a result of this action, educational staff are expected to gain the competence needed for preventing, identifying, and providing adapted and inclusive education to all students (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). From 2025, it is planned that competence enhancement will

be an ongoing action to maintain and further develop competence. While this represents a positive shift in that inclusion and SEN are placed on the agenda for further professional development, a risk with this strategy is that there is an absence of national guidelines or curricula for competence enhancement. Consequently, the content of the professional development program may vary across Norway, depending on the competencies and interests in the academic institution responsible for each municipality. Furthermore, measures for implementation, tools for monitoring actions, focus on student’s outcomes, and plans for revision and further development and implementation have been addressed to a limited extent. In addition, follow-up research to investigate *the effects* of the competence enhancement policy has not yet been implemented (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022), though there exist some descriptive evaluations (e.g., Wendelborg et al., 2023).

It is time for a national investment in further developing the Norwegian quality assurance system (see NOU 2023: 13) and to add evaluation categories that are of specific interest to the education for students with SEN. Subsequently, there is a need to allocate research funding for empirically robust studies to clarify effective strategies for achieving inclusion and to gain insight into how different actions impact student outcomes. Furthermore, previous Norwegian research emphasized the need to include more voices to better understand the concept of inclusion, including those of students themselves, parents, and staff (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2022). Thus, it is crucial to determine when and under what circumstances Norwegian students feel included. In August 2024, a new Norwegian law for education in schools will be ratified. The legislation emphasizes that students’ best interests must be a fundamental consideration for all educational practices. The law also specifies that students have the right to participate in everything relevant to their education. Moreover, students must be heard, and due weight must be given to their opinions. The law clarifies students’ right to self-determination from the age of 15 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023c). In this law, the term “special education” will no longer be used. Instead, the new law introduces terms, such as “personal assistance,” “physical support,” “technical aid,” and “individually tailored education” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023d). There is an ongoing debate as to whether the right to appeal against the content and implementation of the educational offer for students with SEN has been removed. Furthermore, the law no longer states that assessments should measure learning disabilities, and it is unclear as to whether the students themselves or their parents can ask for assessment. Finally, only one yearly internal evaluation of the student’s education is mandated against the students’ IEP goal (Melby-Lervåg & Anmarkrud, 2023).

## Paths Forward for Cross-Country Collaboration

In line with UNESCO's (1994) suggestions, both Norway and other countries should prepare students for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that special and inclusive education in Norway is not fully prepared for such complex situations (see Narot & Kiettikunwong, 2023). Thus, Norway and other countries could possibly benefit from collaboration in developing language-independent systems and practices in such situations. In addition, sharing experiences from the pandemic period could enhance collective understanding of the practical aspects of inclusion, both success factors and barriers.

As a clear common definition of inclusion is lacking in Norway (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023) and in the international community—as we may have to realize that the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) is not entirely clear on how inclusion should be operationalized. Thus, there is a need to engage with experts across the country and worldwide to properly define the term. Although inclusion embodies a cultural aspect that may differ somewhat from country to country, we believe that now is the time for a Delphi consensus study across countries to establish a common understanding of inclusion in schools and produce both a definition of and a list of indicators for inclusion. Such a consensus would help policymakers comprehend and implement new research and practices across countries, making the United Nations' statement of inclusion as a worldwide fundamental human right (UNESCO, 1994) more meaningful in a school context. Only when a clear description of indicators of inclusion is developed and agreed upon, we can move from words and an ideological approach to action.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is partly funded by Norges Forskningsråd project number 327377.

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