



Abstract

Inclusive special education?

On challenges in Norwegian special education in 2007

A study of special education, Evaluating Reform 06¹

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NIFU STEP and Hedmark University College are carrying out a research project studying special education in Norway. This is one of the research projects within the Evaluation of Reform 06.

The main research question is “What is the relationship between different measures within special education (organization, content, resources, learning environment, premises and justifications) and the output of special education in elementary, lower- and upper secondary education?”

The first report from the project is focusing on a) the concept of special education, b) the concepts of integration, segregation, inclusion and exclusion, c) previous research on special education in Norway, and d) the political regulations of special education in Norway in 2007.

The concept of special education

The chapter contains a discussion of two different approaches in conceptualizing special education: The first refers to a juridical formal concept linking special education directly to the individual decision made by the principal based on an experts assessment. The second approach concerns a practical definition of special education dependent on educational contents. In this study, we argue that empirical investigations require the application of both perspectives.

The concepts of integration, segregation, inclusion and exclusion

Here the report illustrates how the ideology of the Norwegian education system has moved from a wanted and planned segregation and exclusion towards integration and inclusion. Segregated solutions are used to a greater extent than wanted and necessary, but the notion of inclusion does not necessarily imply co-presence of all the students in a class at all times. Rather, whether special education is inclusive is a question of the success or failure of the principle of adapted education. Ways of organizing special education should be a topic for repeated discussion in order to attend to both the academic and social aspects of education. This is considered the greater challenge of realizing inclusive education.

Previous research on special education

Recent research on special education in Norway, both within elementary, lower- and upper secondary education, shows a great discrepancy between national goals and results; the intended effects are not achieved. Among other factors, the great variation between the volume of special education between counties, municipalities, schools and classes, how special education function as a relief to and as a channel out of ordinary education, and the non-achievement of intended effects, are discussed.

The political regulations of special education in Norway

The chapter is establishing a near-historical perspective by drawing the lines of the political regulations of special education from the 1960's and into the current situation. The report concludes that the field of special education in Norway in 2007 is characterized by a struggle for power. This conclusion is linked to the responses to the radical suggestion from a state committee to abandon special education from The Education Act. Even if both the Ministry of Education and the Parliament agreed that there were good arguments for supporting this suggestion, the proposal was rejected by both parties. This was partly due to public pressure from particular strong interest groups, a pressure which actually affected the political decision. The ambivalence in this field may explain why signals from the national authorities are as inconsistent as they are: The paragraph on special education is retained, while simultaneously, the official attitude of the Government and the Parliament is to reduce the number of students in special education while increasing the use of adaptive education.

¹ The report is published only in Norwegian: Inkluderende spesialundervisning? Om utfordringer innenfor spesialundervisningen i 2007. Rapport nr 1 fra prosjektet: Gjennomgang av spesialundervisning, Evaluering av Kunnskapsløftet. NIFU STEP rapport 19:2007