

# EDUU

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# EDUCATION INQUIRY

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FESTSCHRIFT FOR LISBETH LUNDAHL

# INVITED SECTION

Elisabet Öhrn & Daniel Kallós (Eds.)

**Elisabet Öhrn** is a Professor of Education at the University of Gothenburg and a part-time professor at Umeå University. Her main research interest incorporates the sociology of education with a special interest in power processes, gender, class and ethnicity. She is currently leading research projects on achievement and gender in secondary school, democratic education in upper secondary school and gender and careers in academia.

**Daniel Kallós** was a Professor of Education (in Swedish 'pedagogik') at Umeå University after 1986. He was Dean of the Faculty of Teacher Education at Umeå University after its establishment in 2000. He was the co-founder and head of the European Network on Teacher Education (TNTEE) 1996ff. He retired in 2002.

# International politics and national reforms: The dynamics between “competence” and the “inclusive school” in Norwegian education policies

*Anne-Lise Arnesen\**

## **Abstract**

In this article, inclusive education is analysed from the perspective of the interlinked, dynamic relationship between international neo-liberal movements and national policies and practices. The aim is to explore the significance of “competence” in recent Norwegian reforms and the changing position attributed to inclusion. The analysis shows that during a very short period from 1997 to the present date Norway has seen a rapid change from a highly state-regulated system with an expressed emphasis on inclusive education policies to one of decentralisation, with an emphasis on competencies, differences and individualisation. I discuss the impact of international studies on national reforms in neo-liberal direction and the implications of such reforms for inclusive education policies and practices in Norway.

**Keywords:** competence; inclusion; neo-liberal ideas; international policies; Norwegian educational reforms

## **Introduction**

During the past few decades, education policies throughout the world have been increasingly influenced by market logic and economic motives. The neo-liberal wave in the 1980s and 1990s has also had an impact on Scandinavian countries which have traditionally been characterised by strong, universal welfare systems and socio-inclusive policies. We can still conceive of these countries as a distinct group in these respects (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). Yet, historically, political processes and social systems have varied among the Nordic countries. Principles of equality, social inclusion and central control were strong in Norway, and principles of management by objectives and results step-by-step tended to be disregarded (Aasen, 2003: 146). However, with a new centre-right [2] government in office in 2001, the time was ripe for Norway to more fully embrace neo-liberal ideas and, in a short time, radical changes have taken place with regard to decentralisation, deregulation and individualisation. A utilitarian approach is competing with an integrationist one in

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\*Østfold University College, Norway. E-mail: anne-lise.arnesen@hiof.no

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terms of paying more attention than before to academic standards in schools, with priority given to basic skills in terms of resources and control (Telhaug, Medias & Aasen, 2004). This turn has not been contested, but furthered and maintained by the centre-left coalition [2] taking office in 2005. As in Sweden, the left failed to provide viable alternatives (Lundahl, 2002).

In this article the concept of “competence”, a particular catchword of liberal thinking that has worked its way into national educational standards of success and failure, is analysed. My primary interest lies in the ways in which the vocabulary of competence and accompanying processes of implementation impinge on the socio-inclusive aspects of the school. The study draws on a research project on inclusion/exclusion carried out 2002-2006 [1]. The main source of material is policy documents from 1997 to the present, a period marked by changing governments [2] and educational reforms. I will also refer to teacher interviews from the same study.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

Education is seen here as an important element of a nationally organised and politically directed programme which aims to improve national well-being, economic growth, the quality of people’s lives and which acts as a means of normalisation and control (Rose, 1999). Drawing on Rose, I set out to analyse the dynamics between the political and the institutional (Rose, 1998). The “*political*” dimension concerns “governmentality”. Contemporary educational politics with a focus on “competence” comprises distinct types of governance involving rhetoric and the application of particular “technologies” with aspirations of producing certain desired effects (Rose, 1999: 52). The “*institutional*” is embodied in the design of institutional space, the arrangements of institutional time and activity, procedures of reward and punishment, and the operation of systems of norms and judgements. “Human technologies” are practices that activate certain assumptions and objectives concerning the human beings who inhabit institutions, e.g. teachers and pupils, and in particular those who fail to meet the standards of “the normal”.

Educational ideas and policies are assumed to circulate internationally, and national imaginaries about “competence” inform us of how certain global discourses overlay national educational practices producing local and national narratives and images of the individual who acts and participates (Popkewitz, 2000). Smith (1990a) states that texts have become sophisticated modes of regulating relations within nation-states and globally. Smith (1990b) suggests that texts establish an objectified “world-in-common” that impinges not only on the relations between people in everyday life, but extends to the co-ordination of acts, decisions, policies and plans of nations as well as large-scale organisations. Hence, texts are not merely local, they travel and are part of broader global discourses e.g. of education, competence and inclusion circulating within international policy texts (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2003; Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2008).

Further, the realities to which action and decision are oriented are *virtual* realities vested in texts and accomplished in distinctive practices of reading and writing (Smith, 1990b). I suggest that the documents and texts that are analysed here are simultaneously situated in social relations and work as active constituents of social relations (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2010). This corresponds with Popkewitz’s (1991: 13) view that “...Educational reforms do not merely transmit information on new practice. They are part of the social relations of schooling, and must be considered a strategic site in which the modernisation of institutions occurs.” In this way we see how national policymaking both takes strategic steps to change policy and the devices they use to underpin these changes. The PISA is an example of use as an impetus for change. A notion of competence and the competent child is defined by the image of the modern child in a knowledge-based society. The problem envisaged here is not the “competence” approach per se, but the way in which competencies are framed and the pedagogical devices used to attain them. This will be explored further below in the Norwegian context.

In the following I explore the ways in which the notions of “competence” and “inclusion” have been transformed in current reforms in Norway since 1997 till the present.

### ***The competence approach in political texts and institutional design***

Competence has in the last decade, in accordance with OECD principles, been adopted as a central concept to guide Norwegian education policies “in order to give the objectives and contents of primary and secondary education a clear aim with emphasis on the pupil’s or apprentice’s overall learning achievement” (NOU 2003: 16: 2). Competence focuses on the ability to master a complex challenge or execute a complex activity or task. The rephrasing of competence as an all-encompassing term is a decision taken in reference to OECD and EU committee work in order to achieve a common understanding of competence across countries, for the purpose of developing common indicators for the evaluation of outcomes. However, this notion becomes a backdrop for assessing the individual as against a norm. In the policy texts under scrutiny, competence and “the inclusive school” are located within a “culture for learning” (Govt Bill 30 (2003-2004); NMER [3], 2005) or the knowledge society. There emerges a sense of consensus across political party lines that we must direct our attention to academic standards in school, and cultivating the cognitive dimensions of children for the benefit of the individual and in order to be competitive as a nation in the global market (European Council, Lisbon, March, 2000).

National policies are implemented in particular ways in order to achieve common international objectives. The most recent institutional reform in Norway is called the Knowledge Promotion (NMER, 2007). A national assessment test scheme was introduced in 2002 (NOU 2002: 10), along with a new curriculum based on attainment objectives in 2005. These “technologies” have become the basis for the pedagogical inscription devices (Popkewitz, 2004) which order and classify the object of teaching,

e.g. the subjects and the pupils. Competence can in this perspective be seen as a central term and norm, on the basis of which pedagogical tools and maps are produced. The notion of the “competent child” is evolving through the orchestration of these inscription devices, and in particular by the formal procedures and requirements instituted for making distinctions between children (Arnesen, 2003; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2010).

### ***The notion of “the inclusive school” in the reform***

Inclusion and integration have been central concepts in international policies. The “inclusive school” is an imagined institution – “a school for all” – vested in a particular political discourse circulated worldwide (UNESCO, 2004). Traditionally, the Norwegian version of inclusion has been built around the notion of social community (*fellesskap*), and a strong commitment towards including “all” children in mainstream schools. These values are less pronounced in recent reforms. Despite rhetoric on inclusion in policy documents, it seems that there has been a turn away from sensitivity towards diversity and individualised teaching within a social community towards teaching the individual (Carlgren et al. 2006). “The competent child” is defined in political texts as the motivated child, the self-governing child, the “child with stamina” with responsibility for his or her own learning (NOU 2003: 16: 2).

The notion of the “inclusive school” has undergone a transformation through a succession of government reforms during the last 10 years, as will be illustrated in a short review of some of the most important policy documents in the period from 1997 to 2007.

The version of inclusion in 1997 was described as follows:

The compulsory school includes all groups of pupils. The school is a workplace and a meeting place for everyone. It is a place where pupils come together, learn from and live with differences, regardless of where they live, their social backgrounds, their genders, their religions, their ethnic origins, and their mental and physical abilities. The compulsory school shall help pupils to develop their abilities by being, learning and working together. The school thus helps to reduce social inequality and to develop a sense of community between groups. In a multicultural society, education must promote equality between pupils with different backgrounds and counteract discriminatory attitudes (*NMER, 1997: 62-63*).

The revision undertaken by the subsequent centre-right coalition (2001-2005) implied a change from a focus on “being, learning and working together” to a focus on differences, individual abilities and needs and differentiation.

We wish to strive for the ideal goal which is to give all pupils adapted and differentiated education based on their own abilities and needs. All pupils are of equal worth, but none of them are alike. Both pupils who are “fed up with theory” and those “thirsting for knowledge” must be met with respect. If we treat all pupils in the same way, we create greater differences. It is demanding work to take differences into consideration, but at the same time this is the greatest challenge facing Norwegian schools (*Govt Bill 30 (2003-2004): 1*).

The emphasis on differences and individualisation rather than social community and inclusive learning environments, has been strengthened by the institutional devices operating within the system of quality assessment. The new centre-left government taking office in the autumn of 2005 did not change this. In fact, the latest reform called “The Knowledge Promotion” that took effect in 2006 maintained the rhetoric and practices of the former government on knowledge promotion, individualisation and the measurement of basic competencies.

The *National Curriculum of 2006* states that primary and lower secondary education is based on the principle of an equal and adapted education for all in an inclusive unified school. However, the social integrationist perspective has lost ground and been replaced by one grounded in individualisation which is “based on and address the diversity of the pupils’ backgrounds and aptitudes. The education shall promote the versatile development of the pupils and their knowledge and skills” (NMER, 2008: 1). The Knowledge Promotion reform has provided all grades with new curricula with clearly stated competence objectives. Certain areas of priority are designed to reinforce education in areas where the government finds that extra efforts are particularly necessary. The following areas are mentioned: entrepreneurship, reading, creative learning, mathematics, natural science and technology, participation for language minorities, foreign languages and competence for development. Inclusive education is not implicitly or explicitly prioritised in general policy texts, and neither are the children and young people who are defined as “special” or at risk of falling outside the mainstream school.

The documents referred to above direct and govern the general system. In other official documents of less authority, such as the *Guidelines for special needs education* from 2004 (NDET [4], 2004) and the new *Guidelines for special needs education and special educational assistance* introduced in 2009 (NDET, 2009), inclusion is mentioned in very general terms. They merely establish the general right to attend the local school, and that inclusion requires changes in teaching practices. The 2004 version insists on the pupil’s right to be part of an academic, social and cultural community, and argues that there should be a balance between concerns for individual adaption and inclusion. The 2009 version has a stronger individual rights perspective and stricter requirements concerning formal regulations concerning, e.g. procedures and routines in applying for special education (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2010). It is also stated that instruction groups should not be formed by default on the basis of academic levels, gender or ethnic belonging (NDET, 2009). However, the guidelines do not seem to have contributed to reducing the number of pupils attending special groups.

This becomes evident in view of current statistics showing an escalation of pupils being defined as “special” and catered for in segregated settings. Compared to most countries, few pupils in Norway attend special schools (Vislie, 2003). In 2007/08 approximately 0.41% of pupils in compulsory education attended special schools (GSI, 2011), a figure which has remained quite stable in recent years. However, the

number of children being catered for in special units within mainstream schools has almost doubled between 2006/07 and 2010/11. The number of children described as having “special needs” is in addition rapidly increasing, from approximately 5.8% of the student population in 2006/2007 to 10.7% in 2010/11 (GSI, 2011). Further, the statistics show that the number of pupils in segregated groups within mainstream schools grew from 26,579 pupils in 2006/07 to 40,592 in 2010/11. In addition, new research reveals that, although Norway has advanced on the international ranking in literacy (Kjærnsli & Roe, 2010), the problem of inequality in education remains (Bakken, 2010; Frønes & Strømme, 2010).

Despite these results, there is little evidence of research making links between increasing segregation, inequality and the political turn in a neo-liberal direction (Frønes & Strømme, 2010). The problems of growing inequality gaps seem to be channelled into discourses of failing pedagogies that should be remedied by more knowledge, individual freedom and central control, and political authorities are given their full attention to academic standards, mapping and assessment systems from cradle to grave (Govt Bill 31 (2007-2008)).

### ***The art of convincing – speeding up change with the help of international studies***

Norway has been more reluctant than the other Scandinavian countries to make way for neo-liberal ideas of freedom of choice, competition and market orientation in education (Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen, 2004). Up to the turn of the century, there was still a central regulated policy based on equality, inclusion and national identity (NMER, 1997). To understand the rapid changes in a neo-liberal direction during the last 10 years, we have to look beyond statements concerning the need for “renewal and bringing education up to date, as well as an effective use of resources so as to get more out of the talents of the population” (NOU 2003: 16: 1). The power of the competence agenda depends on *the mobilising power* it exercises. This again depends on the extent to which the discourse of competence is recognised and adopted by people. Discursive constructions of success and failure work when they are commonly accepted as “natural” or taken for granted. The effects of the international studies PISA, PIRLS and TIMMS, have been crucial in this sense.

The extensive changes in a neo-liberal direction carried out in countries across the globe have generally met little resistance and political debate. Politicians and other decision-makers who were interviewed in an international study (the EGSIE project) talked about an “inevitable” or “necessary” change, a reaction to rapid social and technological development. Policy documents reflect the same understanding (Karlsen, 2002; Lindblad et al., 2002; Rinne, Kivirauma & Simola, 2002).

The initial intention of the indicators being investigated by the international tests (PISA and TIMMS) was to provide national policymakers with a broader understanding of the factors influencing the quality of education and permit them to

explore a wider range of policy options. The decision to redefine competence as an all-encompassing term was meant to create a common understanding of competence across countries and to develop common indicators for evaluation of outcomes (EC, 2001; OECD, 2005).

Norway participated for the first time in PISA 2000. Since the first results were presented in 2001, the Norwegian Ministers of Education and Research have repeatedly expressed great concern with the academic level of the Norwegian school. “Crisis” is a key word that has started circulating about the failure of the Norwegian school system in a number of reports and media texts. Although international statistics on e.g. literacy have placed Norway in the middle range (Lie, Linnakyla & Roe, 2003), the massive critique of the school system has continued and people refer to the failing school as a matter of course.

Critical voices, however, doubt the extent to which a crisis of the school system exists as a national phenomenon (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Glass, 2004). In fact, worrying about failure and low achievement seems to be a common concern among most OECD member countries. Looking beyond national borders, we see that most countries have put the “crisis of the school system” on their agendas and most have addressed the need for renewal. “Crisis” has, according to Glass (2004), been the “galvanising metaphor” for discussing American education since the early 1980s. Scholars such as Berliner & Biddle (1995) have gone so far as to argue that the “crisis” was manufactured or created to prop up a political agenda. The idea of a systemic “crisis” has legitimised politicians’ desire to speed up the implementation of new reforms.

There is reason to ask whether this has also been the case in Norway. Neo-liberal rhetoric on individual rights, achievement standards, quality, and freedom of choice have become adopted in practical terms across party lines. Rather than critically exploring premises for new policies and their rationale and effects, both the authorities and the experts are placing the problem on the schools and teachers; “progressive” working methods, a lack of discipline as well as the lack of competent teachers have all been blamed for the “crisis” in Norway (Telhaug, 2003). Consequently, there have been stronger claims on schools and teachers to provide high student results in achievement tests. This creates tensions between different values and considerations, an issue that I turn to next.

### ***Tensions and dilemmas***

The competence reform has led to increased pressure on learning (*læringstrykk*). The standardised norms for achievement and competition between schools have come to influence the educational agenda strongly. The research project which this article draws on contains, in addition to the study of policy texts, an ethnographic study in two schools over four years (Arnesen, 2006). A number of interviews were taken with teachers in the observed classes, 15 teachers in all. The study was carried out in the wake of the first results from the PISA studies that were publicised in

2001 and through the introduction of national tests and public ranking of schools in 2004. Teachers reported increased pressure to attain high scores for their school in national achievement tests. The following extracts from two interviews can serve as illustrations of this effect:

Elisabeth: We are defined as a demonstration school ... These schools are rewarded for being involved in development work and the Head of our school applied for a two-year period. ...  
Christina: Yes, and there is a high level of ambition. If we only score in the middle range, it is a disaster.

Interviewer: What do the scores stand for? The pupils' achievement scores?

Christina: Yes, for instance, if there has been a survey regarding reading or social well-being or decision making, and we score in the normal range, or just the national average, it is a disaster.

Interviewer: What do you do if there is a disaster?

Christina: Then we make an action plan. Then we discuss among the staff why and find out how to improve, setting up a plan of action which everybody must follow.

Interviewer: Give an example.

Christina: We made a giant leap of improvement when beginner training was introduced as an area of commitment. We used to focus on "Homework and a positive school," but still we obtained just average results. A lot of resources were put into a new scheme and one of the managers was sent off to take courses on alternative methods. Now we use more time and a much more focused method on language and letter learning programmes, and a progression plan for increasing language consciousness... Very systematic (*Teacher interview, April 2004*).

Competition in this sense may promote involvement and improvement in particular prioritised areas (in this case reading). However, this reductionist orientation of schools and teachers also has a number of unintended consequences. Firstly, those areas in which data are reported take on a level of importance that is considerably higher than those excluded from study. For instance, it turns out that the total increase in lessons in the period between 1997 and 2003 has been devoted to strengthening academic subjects (Imsen, 2004). Aesthetic, practical and social training have lost ground. Secondly, the tests themselves may disrupt ongoing work with vulnerable children and those who need special attention and help as in the following example. It illustrates the dilemma two teachers face when they are, on one hand, expected to obtain better general results in international and national tests and, on the other, required to take into account the diversity of children and the needs of those who need extra attention and support:

Kirsti: I was at the school when they participated in the national test for the first time, and I was particularly conscious of how the bilingual children fell outside the system. And we were totally honest (and told the pupils to) do the best they could. We did not do any preparation in advance. The person in charge of the test was sceptical because, as she said, "I do not believe that they understand". And right enough, they did not grasp the text, because everything was different from what they were used to. So now we have started preparing our

students for these types of tasks. What can I do? I can just stand here saying that tomorrow you will be tested in this and that. That does not measure anything!!

Berit: One of my colleagues was totally upset. In her class there are many bilingual children, including a small boy from Syria. She had really worked very hard to make him feel safe in the school environment and at every challenge he met, she said: “Take it easy, we have plenty of time. You will manage”, and she felt that things really were falling into place. Then came the day (of the test): “Please start”, after three minutes, “Stop”. And then the next (task) and “Stop”. This undermined all the confidence that she had tried to build up in the pupil (*Teacher interview, Sept. 2004*).

Whereas a greater emphasis on knowledge and order was welcomed by a number of teachers and researchers, most of the teachers I interviewed said that the new regime was inadequate for the most challenging pupils and that the demand for efficiency and heightened performance in producing good results in the national test prevented them from working for inclusion. A recent report from the UK (Alexander, Peacock & Harlen, 2011: 3) claims that the prospect of testing, especially high stakes testing undertaken in the public arena, makes teachers increasingly more conscious of the national tests, and direct their attention to those areas of learning to be tested, often to the exclusion of other activities of considerable educational importance. This affects not least the teachers’ work for enhancing the socio-inclusive aspects of classroom practices vital to the success of the most “needy” children. More focus on students’ academic competencies and performance implies greater risks of marginalisation and exclusion of vulnerable students, which may account for the recent increase in the number of children being reported to need special help and, more often than before, being catered for in segregated settings (GSI, 2011).

### ***Final remarks***

International politics and national reforms are interlinked in complex ways. By participating in international meetings, national politicians and experts are influenced by and are influencing the international agenda. The market-driven economy and globalisation has had a major impact on policy-building in EC and OECD countries in the last 30 years. However, despite strong movements, nations find various local solutions. Norway has long been exceptionally resistant to giving way to neoliberal ideas in education. Seen from this perspective, the transformation of the educational landscape during the last decade has been quite dramatic in Norway.

Within the competence regime, it is demonstrated that the commitment to inclusion is under pressure and social-inclusive aspects of education are less prominent. Signs to this effect are the growing number of children being defined as failing to meet educational standards and being offered provision in special groups. There is generally little knowledge about the impact of the turn towards competence-based education policies and practices and their implications for inclusion. Who among the students will benefit from these politics and who will not? Who are included,

and who are the new excluded? Statistical reviews can provide broad and general information about differences and changes in achievement and achievement profiles on a national basis. However, they cannot provide information about the effects on individual development. On a general basis, it is argued that the use of competence norms as parameters for success and failure upholds a hierarchy by which those “at the bottom”, even if they achieve better than before, are still at risk of being excluded from the mainstream (Wendelborg, 2010).

Hence, politics of equity and inclusion based on these premises may mask increasing exclusion through their institutional practices. The view of children primarily as learners and acquirers of competencies, guided by images of the active, creative, well-adjusted and self-governing child, in control of his or her life, may be tempting. However, a “school for all” has to consider children in a more complex and multifaceted way. In fact, inclusive education policies and practices involve acknowledging and rendering legitimate opposite qualities, e.g. weakness, vulnerability and dependency as part of normal ways of being human. In my view, the very challenge of inclusion policies and practices is to reduce barriers to participation, and to actively acknowledge different ways of expressing agency and stimulate “being, learning and working together” in a spirit of democracy and social justice (Arnesen, Allan & Simonsen, 2009). In a market-driven culture where competence, efficiency and competition are stressed, ideals such as equity and social community may seem subsidiary to the enhancement of competencies, and a strong commitment to inclusion at the school level in terms of the above can be considered as unrealistic (Allan, 2008) or even as a burden (Armstrong, 2003; Vlachou, 2004).

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*Anne-Lise Arnesen* is a Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education at Østfold University College. She is also a Visiting Professor at Umeå University, Sweden. Her main areas of research and publications encompass educational policies, equality, diversity and inclusion/exclusion in pedagogical institutions. She is currently heading two research projects; Inclusion in kindergarten (2008-11) and Knowledge, communication, participation and diversity in professional contexts (2010-14).

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## **Endnotes:**

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- <sup>2</sup> In office at the actual time of the analysis: 1997-2001: a Social Democratic Government, 2001-2005: a Conservative/Christian Democratic/Liberal government and from 2005 and onwards: Social Democratic/Socialist/Centre Party Government.
- <sup>3</sup> NMER is the acronym for the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research
- <sup>4</sup> NDET is the acronym for the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

