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## The clustering of public values in local educational governance: the case of inclusion

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore and discuss how the clustering of values in local educational governance manifests in the case of inclusion. Public values and the role that these play as mediating factors are important in local governance processes; however, they are often overlooked in empirical studies. Inclusion is interesting because it is currently one of the most dominant political aims in education. Based on extensive data from interviews with municipal administrators in Norway, the following three aspects were important in their meaning-making around inclusive education: (1) an assumed common understanding of inclusion, (2) a general approach to adaptation and (3) a broad view on school development. These largely reflected public values, such as equality and participation, rule of law and accountability, professional autonomy and innovation. However, because the values are clustered in particular ways, inclusion largely becomes a practical and didactic issue. This is important to discuss as the municipal level arguably needs to be involved in analytical discussions to enhance inclusive education. Professional autonomy and accountability are both emphasised and may create value conflicts. How public sector values are mediated and clustered with each other should be discussed, as how this is done give directions for educational practices.

### KEYWORDS

Public values; inclusion; inclusive education; governance; municipal leaders

## Introduction

This article explores the clustering of values and the ways in which public values play mediating roles in local educational governance. How municipal administrators in Norway give meaning to the concept of inclusion and what values they uphold in their strategies to enhance inclusive education are studied. Inclusion is an interesting case for studying the role of values in educational governance, as it is currently one of the most dominant political aims and values in education. The goal of successfully facilitating inclusive education has been a primary reason behind compulsory school reforms across all Nordic countries whose educational systems have struggled with this issue for decades (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014). Internationally, the social democratic welfare states in the Nordic countries are often referred to as prime examples of inclusion characterised by unique qualities, including educational reforms that have

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aimed to promote social justice, equality and cohesion and to provide schooling of high and equal quality, regardless of children's and young people's resources, origin and location (Lundahl, 2016). Due to developments such as migration and segregation, the importance of succeeding in developing and ensuring inclusive education has increased.

Because inclusion is a contested term, this study employs a broad, general definition in which inclusion means that all students should have the opportunity to fully participate socially and academically in the life of the school and achieve to the best of their ability (Florian, 2014; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm, 2021). Such participation would involve the creation of inclusive communities in schools and classrooms, conceptualised in relation to the nature of knowledge students acquire, the pedagogy that is needed for enabling students to access the curriculum and assessment forms that lead to subject-related learning as well as transformative learning (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016). More critical studies would suggest that the concept of inclusion is not definitional but rather has to do with questions of practical political power, which has to be analysed with reference to the wider social relations in a globalised world. When the meaning of inclusion is framed differently, inclusion and inclusive educational practices should be studied in diverse national contexts with different cultural traditions and governance systems (Armstrong et al., 2011), in which values are fundamental (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). The importance of public values in governance and politics implies the need to study professionals at the local levels who lead and enforce educational reforms to elucidate how these actors define and give direction for educational practices. This includes paying attention to the tensions and resistance that can result from accountability-driven school reforms (e.g. Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

In most countries, municipalities and districts are situated in the midst of current education governing. However, these local systems are often understudied actors, even though they represent a web of interrelated and interdependent roles, responsibilities and relationships (Avidov-Ungar & Reingold, 2018; Prøitz & Aasen, 2018; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). There is also limited insight into the role of municipal administrators as interpreters of inclusion and why local approaches to inclusive education vary across municipalities. Existing research on approaches to inclusive education has underscored the complex web of factors that should be considered, such as school personnel, stakeholders, coherent organisations, families and communities, policy and practices at all levels of the system, as well as the need for teachers to have space to plan, learn and work collaboratively (Ainscow, Chapman, & Hadfield, 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Studies have also questioned the collection of research on inclusive education, and in particular, expressed a need to develop empirical investigations into processes that maintain inclusive education practices and to conduct studies identifying specific factors that make education more inclusive (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

Norway is an interesting case for studying the governance dimension of inclusive education. Representing a decentralised system of educational governance, mid-central educational authorities – the municipalities – are responsible for improving students' academic and social achievements and initiating school development processes. At the same time, despite being a low-stakes system, schools and municipalities are, to a greater extent than previously, held accountable for student achievement and learning

environments. In 2005, a national quality assessment system was introduced, including national testing for students in grades 5, 8 and 9. This increasingly performative form of accountability partly challenged educational values inherent in a long tradition of compulsory schooling, non-competitiveness and egalitarian values, where teachers have enjoyed a relatively high degree of classroom autonomy based on the didactic knowledge acquired in teacher education (Arnesen, 2011; Slagstad, 2001; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006).

Today, about 95% of students attend comprehensive mainstream state schools. A central term in policy and practice in Norwegian education policy over the past decades has been “adapted education”, a requirement that is found in the Education Act and that can be described as a general right for students. Adapted education has been conceptualised differently over time, but a remaining understanding is that it has to do with adapting content and teaching methods to students’ abilities and achievements to better meet their needs (Jensen & Lillejord, 2006). Special needs education is an individual right. In more recent years, including the newest curriculum update from 2020, LK 2020, inclusion and inclusive education were put high on the policy agenda. However, research has shown that inclusive rhetoric and high ambitions in educational policy have been insufficient to create inclusive education and inclusive school communities locally (Haug, 2019; Nes, 2010).

Moreover, and despite being inherent in several policy aims and measures, inclusion is a contested and value-laden concept subject to both external and internal definitions that influence local meaning-making and practices. Given the high importance placed on success in providing inclusive education, both for individuals and societies, this article aims to explore prominent values in municipalities’ work to enhance inclusion. The research questions to be addressed are as follows: How do municipal administrators give meaning to inclusion in education? What public values are emphasised, and how does the clustering of such values contribute to a concept’s framing and its related practices? First, we provide a brief review of previous research on inclusive education and describe analytical perspectives on public values. We then outline the data and methods before presenting our findings. Finally, we discuss and conclude our findings, including outlining some implications.

## **Inclusive education as a concept – a brief review**

Although inclusion is a highly ambitious and valuable concept, it is also a contested concept. In a critical review of research on inclusion in education, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) identified four different definitions: (1) inclusion as the placement of pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (placement definition), (2) inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of pupils with disabilities (specified individualised definition), (3) inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all pupils (general individualised definition) and (4) inclusion as the creation of communities (community definition). Moreover, most research today emphasises inclusion as being a multi-dimensional or multi-faceted concept (Haug, 2019; Michell, 2015; Mitchell, 2018; Slee, 2009). Several studies have also documented that a one-dimensional approach to inclusion – that is, being concerned with the placement of students and

organisational differentiation – has been weakened in many contexts (e.g. Haug, 2019; Norwich, 2008).

Existing research has highlighted inclusion and inclusive education as concepts that are complex, contradictory and confusing (Kiuppis, 2011; Slee, 2011, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). In particular, the nature and aspirations of inclusive education are ubiquitous and arguably not made clearer through educational policy. Much research has recognised that the concept of inclusion has an ideological origin and that it does not in itself ensure that exclusion does not take place (e.g. Allan, 2013; Brantlinger, 1997; Pihl, Holm, Riitaoja, Kjaran, & Carlson, 2018; Slee, 2019; Ware, 2004). Moreover, this is related to the challenging work of teachers and school leaders who must achieve inclusive education through their practical work in schools and classrooms (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Additionally, although the actors agree on the importance of inclusive education, there are disagreements about the governing tools in use. For example, accountability and data use are seen as necessary for developing inclusive education, but they are also seen as a cause of marginalisation and exclusion (Slee, 2019; Slee & Allan, 2001). This tension was also seen in the case of formative assessment. On the one hand, formative assessment recognises the importance of the inter-relationship between the curriculum, students, pedagogy and the community within which learning takes place and has been found to be important in realising inclusive education (Hayward, 2014). On the other hand, it can also act as a force against inclusion by contributing to the process of labelling, categorising and excluding students (Slee & Allan, 2001).

In a recent review on inclusive education, the results indicated the following aspects as characteristic of teachers' inclusive classroom practices: collaboration and co-teaching, grouping and modification (of assessments, content, extent, instruction, learning environments, materials, processes, products and time frames), individual motivation and feedback and personnel support for students (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Moreover, the research emphasised the importance of teacher competence and access to support teams of professionals and leaders committed to accepting and promoting inclusion (Michell, 2015). Hayward (2014) pointed to the importance of collaboration and innovation and stated that work across different system levels is just as important for developing and securing inclusive education as work in schools and classrooms. Local and regional support has also been highlighted as crucial to developing inclusive education in schools (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Still, the role of these mid-central levels of educational governance in such processes has been scarcely studied, which is arguably highly important for how a phenomenon is framed and thus gives directions for educational practice.

### **Analytical perspectives on public values**

Inclusion is an interesting case in which to study the role of public values in local educational governance. Inclusion is high on the political agenda, not only in education but in society as a whole, and it is important to enhance the understanding of how local meaning-making frames directions for educational practices. Public values are fundamental to governance and policy (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). Since municipal administrators are affected not only by educational values, such as inclusion, but also societal,

governance and administration values – a combination that is significantly overlooked in studies of values in education – we use analytical perspectives on public values in the analysis to enhance insight into the mediating role of values in governance.

An often-used definition of a value in the literature on values in the public sector is that it is “a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action” (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). Therefore, it is important to note that a public value is something socially acceptable to wish for, personally and organisationally, and not just in governance. Beck Jørgensen (2003) described a public value universe as having three layers, where the inner layer consists of stable values, such as societal responsibility, equality, security under the law and transparency (Beck Jørgensen & Rutgers, 2015). The middle layer involves basic normative conceptions within a profession or a specific area, for example, about the role of the profession, autonomy or how one should respond to certain kinds of issues and problems (i.e. what can be described as “educational values”). These values are considered stable over time, although they can also be advanced in relation to development in a specific field. The outer layer, the workplace, is where values related to governance, leadership and personal relationships are situated, including more fluctuating and trend-based values and rationales. Values situated on the different layers could create conflicts but could also be seen as interrelated and as building upon each other. Values that are closely related to each other can form clusters, which are closer to or more distant from each other (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Beck Jørgensen & Rutgers, 2015).

These three layers of values can support each other or create tension and conflict. Leaders in the public sector who typically find values in the different layers probably experience greater coherence between the levels than professionals would (Wennes & Busch, 2012). One example is equality, a value on the inner layer that, in education, relates to its main purpose: to help attain a more equal and equitable society (Manzer, 2003). However, governance values situated on the outer layer can be seen to both increase and decrease equality, such as accountability. The values can also be redefined, narrowed or broadened by different actors (Mausethagen, Prøitz & Skedsmo, 2021). For example, leaders could be more socialised into present policy ideas about inclusive education than teachers. In contrast, teachers often strive to practice inclusion in their everyday work without necessarily talking about it as a value but as didactical and practical “problems” to be solved.

## Data and methods

The data in this study consisted of extensive interview data from 20 municipalities. The 356 municipalities in Norway have “school ownership” for primary and lower secondary schools. This decentralised system implies that local governments are central actors in the political system and have the authority to engage in a wide range of discretionary activities, such as developing and implementing strategies to improve educational practice. However, they are subject to control by national governments (Helgøy, Homme, Lundahl, & Rönnerberg, 2019). Promoting social inclusion by securing equal access to quality education for all students has been a key feature of the comprehensive education system. Consequently, this is also a vital area for municipalities. However, to different degrees, sizes and time spans, municipalities have been able to fulfil such aims and activities (Prøitz & Aasen, 2018). Norway’s roughly 350

municipalities have a long tradition of local autonomy; they must provide primary and secondary education under the Norwegian Education Act and related regulations, such as the national curriculum, and they are responsible for reporting evaluation results within the national quality assessment system. The municipalities are described as “school owners”, governing about 95% of primary and secondary schools, and they hold their own regulatory and decision-making powers, elected political and employed administrative bodies, budgets and local rules (Aasen et al., 2012).

The 20 municipalities were selected to create variations in the sample. They differed in geographical variation (rural or urban), size and type of established quality assessment system. We emailed the municipal administrators and asked each to nominate a candidate to participate in the interview. In most municipalities, we interviewed the municipal administrator, while in others, we interviewed an adviser that the administrators thought would be better acquainted with the topic. The 20 interviews were conducted by telephone during spring 2020 and lasted for 30–45 minutes. In most interviews, two researchers were present. Four different researchers conducted the interviews; hence, there were some variations in the follow-up questions. The interview guide included questions about the structure of the municipality, general principles for inclusion and inclusive educational practices and the role of schools and teachers. To ensure the informants’ anonymity, we used fictitious names (wood species) for the municipalities. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

The analysis was performed in three steps. To gain an overview of the material, we engaged in meaning condensation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). We organised and grouped the statements into prominent understandings of inclusion and inclusive education. Examples of themes were “inclusion as adapted education” and “competence development”. Second, we looked more closely at differences and similarities between the municipal leaders in their understanding of inclusion, and moreover, what kind of strategies they emphasised to “secure” inclusive education in schools and classrooms. Third, we conducted a more deductively driven analysis and interpreted the findings based on the analytical perspectives on public values. These analytical perspectives were chosen because we found that different values were central in the leaders’ meaning-making in the more inductively driven analysis in Steps One and Two in the analysis. Such synthesis of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches permits an analysis that is sensitive to locally constructed meanings while paying attention to the wider cultural context as it is understood in relation to the theoretical standpoints. Instead of discouraging theory-driven interpretations, analysis can be done and advanced through the employment of different theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

We presented and discussed the analysis method with peers as a means of ensuring communicative validity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Although the findings are analytically generalisable, it should be emphasised that the sample variability, in combination with the total number of municipalities (about 6% of all municipalities), suggests that steps for attaining a certain degree of generalisation were taken (Gobo, 2008).

## Findings

Based on the analysis in Step One, we identified three prominent characteristics of how municipal administrators as a group gave meaning to inclusion and what they saw as

important to enhance inclusive education in the classrooms: (1) an assumed common understanding of inclusive education, (2) a general approach to adaptation and (3) a broad view on school development. These characteristics largely reflected public values, such as equality and participation, rule of law and accountability and professional autonomy and innovation. The following sections examine these characteristics to develop a deeper understanding of the role of values and how they cluster in educational governance. What comes to play in such clusters will be further debated in the Discussion section.

### *An assumed common understanding*

All municipal administrators gave meaning to inclusive education by referring to key national policy documents, such as the Curriculum and the Education Act. They also gave meaning to inclusive education by referring to local strategic plans and what the local politicians had decided, with a specific focus on how they, as administrators, had worked with actors within the schools to develop a shared understanding of how to develop a school that managed to include all students.

It is about equality, that everyone should participate. The upbringing strategy was politically decided . . . . We worked on it all last year and the year before that. (Beech municipality)

The administrators largely emphasised equality as a value to strive for in relation to inclusion, while the broader challenges of inclusion in today's schools or educational society were more rarely addressed. Instead, the administrators were mainly concerned with inclusion in a more practical sense, such as how inclusion can be "solved", for example, through differentiation and adaptation of the curriculum, assessment and teaching practices. In this respect, teachers' didactic competence often came forth as a solution or concern. The municipality administrators largely held a quite practical view on this issue, where initiatives that could strengthen teachers' didactic competence and how they could better provide adapted education to the students were the focus. These strategies for improving competence were broadly positioned to enhance inclusive education. However, the actual relationship between these two strategies remained quite unclear or somewhat unquestioned.

Their meaning-making regarding inclusion, often mediated through an understanding of adapted education, was largely characterised by the need to meet students' educational needs by creating and maintaining inclusive learning environments. This reflected the values of equality and participation, while both the issue of adapted education and the learning environment quickly became quite practical, as the administrators gave several examples of the local projects they had initiated to support this. Most of the administrators thus discussed inclusion and inclusive education in a somewhat particular combination of vagueness and practical concreteness. There were fewer examples among the administrators of a more substantial and analytical understanding of inclusive education. However, there were a few exceptions. For example, the administrator in Lind municipality emphasised that as a result of such work, the close connection between values such as "inclusion, involvement and equality" had become prominent. Several administrators also



described that they had recently emphasised working with the values of inclusion and inclusive education as part of an increasing focus on these values in the renewed curriculum:

We worked a lot with the school's values, the overriding part in the renewal ... We worked a lot to ensure that inclusion is expressed and that the organisation puts into words ... what does that mean, what is your contribution? (Chestnut municipality)

There is limited focus on the more general, aspirational perspectives of inclusive education. It was also, to a limited extent, given meaning as democratic processes. For example, student involvement was rarely emphasised among administrators. However, other key societal values, such as diversity and justice in terms of securing individual and common rights, were emphasised. Arguably, such values were perhaps seen as more relevant to everyday classroom practices than democracy, not just to individual students' development.

### ***A general approach to adaptation***

Municipal administrators can be described as embodying a “political correctness” and a quite general approach towards inclusive education since they mainly paraphrased policy documents and referred to societal values, such as equality. However, they also mainly saw inclusive education in a practical manner. When talking about the educational practices they aimed for, they primarily focused on two aspects: that each student must receive adapted education and that all students, regardless of their abilities, should be integrated into mixed-ability and non-streamed classes. Most of the municipal administrators regarded these two strategies as important. However, there were differences between the administrators in how they interpreted adapted education. While some municipal administrators focused on how to alter the schools' organisational structure (e.g. students divided for a short period into groups based on ability level or interests), others focused more on the importance of teachers' pedagogical practices within the classroom. For many, keeping all students within the same classroom came forth as crucial and justified, given that adapted education is for all pupils, regardless of their ability level.

The administrators also emphasised the importance of teachers succeeding in including all students in their classrooms, regardless of the students' individual abilities and competences. However, the municipal administrators were more unclear about the challenges related to these strategies and/or about what they had done specifically to make sure that teachers were prepared. They also did not apply what can be described as a narrow understanding of adapted education – that is, talking about making use of specific methods and/or learning programmes used in general or in special education. They also did not mention specific student groups.

We think that facilitating adapted education benefits the students more to be a member of a group, class—rather than being alone and excluded from the other students ... Inclusive education is that we manage to take care of all students, regardless of their ability. The Education Agency is concerned with how we can conduct good and adapted education in what we call whole-class teaching. (Beech municipality)

Establishing routines was seen as important for enhancing inclusion, a measure used simultaneously to ensure that the Education Act was followed. The administrators claimed that systematic work is crucial to achieving inclusive education practices. For example, since school leaders are responsible for the school's day-to-day management, several municipal administrators described that they had established meeting points with the school leaders, a practice they pursued to fulfil legal requirements.

The municipal administrators urged teachers to participate in various competence development initiatives and to use different resources to work systematically. However, the findings indicate that there was relatively little inclusive education-related formal training for teachers. One administrator said that they worked with the schools to help teachers take care of all students within the ordinary classes, often by using two teachers or digital aids in the classroom. Many of the administrators addressed the importance of teachers' autonomy and emphasised that teachers were the best persons to decide how to create inclusive education practices through adapted education. Teachers' professional autonomy appears to be a quite stable value, situated in the second layer of the value universe, that oriented the administrators' choice of strategies used to enhance inclusive education.

The analysis thus found that the municipality administrators mainly discussed inclusion by referring to adapted education and teachers' didactical competence. When discussing how to achieve inclusion for all students, the administrators mainly placed the responsibility for this on the teachers by emphasising their ability to adapt and differentiate the curricula, teaching methods and learning materials as appropriate for the students' ability levels. These findings also underscore how administrators mainly regard inclusive education as a practical and didactic challenge. Therefore, we might say that most municipal administrators' have equated inclusive education with adapted education. This is clearly a narrowing down of the more general, aspirational aspects of inclusive education.

### ***A broad view on school development***

The municipal administrators largely indicated that innovation and school development work were crucial for developing and ensuring inclusive education. This implies that when teachers are involved in development projects relevant to inclusion in a broad sense, this would almost automatically support the development of inclusive education practices. Examples of such initiatives were national competence development projects for the assessment and renewal of teaching methods, which were often discussed in enthusiastic ways and with a great belief that they influence teachers' inclusive education practices.

We learned a lot from the 'UiU' project. We established concepts in relation to good teaching so that teaching should be practically varied and relevant. And it has become such a thing that teachers and schools in Lind municipality have gotten under the skin when planning teaching. And what we experience is that it makes it more inclusive for all students; everyone should experience both relevant and varied and practical teaching. (Lind municipality)

Through the emphasis on competence development, innovation came forth as a significant value situated both on the second layer in terms of innovation being a stable professional value and on the third layer in terms of the current governing of education. However, although school development seemed to be a value in the second layer, it was also quite often related to more fluctuating and fashion-based values, such as learning outcomes and assessment practices. The value of school development is also a good match with the value of teacher autonomy, but it could also imply tensions if the school development process is largely initiated from “above”.

The analysis revealed several examples of the strong emphasis on such general school development projects, including the belief that these projects would increase teacher competence, although they did not specifically focus on inclusion. One prominent example was assessment; another was class management: “You can say that gaining better competence in class management is noticeable in relation to inclusion” (Hazel municipality). As such, there is a strong belief in the diffusion of competence and a kind of “trickle down” effect where innovative practices will develop in the classroom as a result of development projects, thus enhancing inclusive education.

The great start was the ‘assessment for learning’ project. We had it in advance of ‘the science initiative’. We kept that project warm by ourselves for almost two more years. It was about understanding the curriculum and curriculum goals . . . . How can you increase learning outcomes through good assessment practice? (Pine municipality)

On the one hand, the administrators were concerned about how national and local projects had been important for developing routines, networks and competence that would support and strengthen their work. They held a similarly strong belief that the teachers developed their didactic competence through these projects. On the other hand, they did not necessarily know how these processes played out at the other institutional levels. There seemed to be significant trust that these programmes would lead to changes in educational practice, implicitly also emphasising the autonomy of school leaders and teachers. This emphasis on professional autonomy also reflected values in the second layer, representing more stable values in the field of education and reflecting professional standards.

However, the value of professional autonomy is not straightforward since these projects were often largely top-down national development projects where the teachers were only insignificantly involved in their design. Furthermore, development work was also related to data on student performance that the municipal administrators were expected to make use of in their local quality assessment system, and ultimately, their school development efforts. Values regarding transparency, accountability and the use of student achievement data were placed on the outer layer of the value universe, not surprisingly being quite prominent among the administrators.

However, there were variations in these values’ perceived importance among administrators, partially reflecting the local quality assessment systems. Several municipal administrators were also more enthusiastic when they described local and bottom-up development initiatives established by the teachers, school leaders and/or administrators themselves. The municipal administrators seemed to be quite sure that such locally based projects had led to positive changes in the classrooms and made a difference for the students in terms of enhancing inclusive education.

I have also followed an initiative we have had for many years related to mathematics. It started with an innovation award a few years ago. Because it started with a passionate soul and a teacher at a school, a mathematics teacher who felt that she did not reach the potential of the youngest students . . . . Therefore, we supported her in a project together with the local university to further develop mathematics teaching. (Ask municipality)

The municipal administrators offered several examples of collaborative and cooperative efforts, either related to specific projects or in local networks, with universities and university colleges that they appreciated. However, these were only slightly targeted towards inclusive education. The strategies to promote school development and thus innovation as a value were quite broad, with the idea that these efforts, together with an emphasis on student performance and accountability, would lead to desired changes in teachers' inclusive education practices. Thus, the values of innovation and accountability were clustered together with professional autonomy to enhance inclusion.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we asked the following research questions: How do municipal administrators give meaning to inclusion in education? What public values are emphasised, and how does the clustering of such values contribute to the concept's framing and related practices? We found the following prominent characteristics in the work to promote inclusion in the municipalities: (1) an assumed common understanding of inclusion, (2) a general approach to adaptation and (3) a broad view on development work. These characteristics largely reflected public values, such as equality and participation, rule of the law (individual and general rights) and accountability, and professional autonomy and innovation. In this section, we further discuss the value clusters that appeared and what these illustrate in terms of the roles that local governance actors play in meaning-making around the concept and thus framing educational practices.

Stable societal values such as equality, participation and diversity came forth as important values in the meaning-making around inclusive education for the municipal administrators. Together with an emphasis on the protection of individual and common rights in the Education Act, these values largely reflected central values in the Norwegian educational system that have been consistent over time (Slagstad, 2001; Telhaug et al., 2006). However, similar to what we know from teachers' practices around societal and educational values and value dilemmas, they often become quite practical and didactical (Mausethagen, Prøitz & Skedsmo, 2021). Given the relatively few discussions about the concept of inclusion, this could be interpreted as a "missed opportunity" in the sense that given a decentralised system, there should be considerable room for such discussions; however, they seem to take place only to a limited extent.

The municipality administrators occupy a particularly important position because they are responsible for promoting social inclusion by ensuring equal access to quality education for all students. However, they also have to make such values concrete by developing policies, cultures, practices and teaching strategies that are likely to lead to inclusive educational practices. For the administrators, "success" has primarily been documented through available student achievement data, thus upholding the more fashion-based governance values related to quality management, efficiency and accountability (Beck Jørgensen, 2003). The administrators did not see these values as creating value conflicts,

although such conflicts could increase among school leaders and teachers. Such conflicts between accountability and efficiency as governance values and the more stable values of justice and diversity have been well established by previous research, particularly the argument that new governance mechanisms in education lead to marginalisation and exclusion rather than the opposite (e.g. Slee, 2019).

Professional autonomy and accountability were both emphasised in municipal strategies, but they also represent values spread across different value layers: While inclusion is related to several societal values found on the inner layer, innovation and professional autonomy are values found on the second layer (Beck Jørgensen, 2003). Professional autonomy is particularly emphasised through great belief in a more general approach to competence development and innovation, creating a cluster that establishes a “causality” in that innovative and autonomous development work will lead to more inclusive educational practices. However, such clusters are not easy for practitioners to detect, and this distinct combination of values can strengthen inclusion, which has been mainly regarded as a practical and didactical issue for administrators, school leaders and teachers alike. With this specific clustering of different values also comes significant trust and an almost boundless responsibility for teachers to resolve the “problem” of inclusion.

The relatively limited focus on differentiated and targeted strategies for specific student groups should also be critically discussed. On the one hand, such a general approach mirrors an understanding of inclusion as the promotion of a “school for all” (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). This reflects what Göransson and Nilholm (2014) described as a “general individualised definition” of inclusion, that is, inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all pupils to increase their outcomes. Targeted responses to specific groups of students was addressed to a limited extent. One related exception is categorisations and the labelling of students that follow from testing and practices around the use of student achievement data. An interesting question to discuss in further research is to what extent these categories “take over”, for example, for categories such as student languages and diagnoses and what their consequences are for inclusive educational practices.

One main finding is that the municipal administrators have interpreted inclusion as adapted education, which reduces inclusion to a practical, didactical and action-oriented concept. They emphasised that it is the teachers’ responsibility to meet students’ social and academic needs and to secure student achievement and “education for all” (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Even if inclusion and adapted education can be regarded as overarching values, they are somewhat different hierarchically. While inclusion can be seen as an educational value related to key public values, adapted education is one of several ways that can make education more inclusive. This means that if inclusion is mainly discussed in relation to didactical and practical issues – such as adjustments by way of adapted curricula, assessments and teaching – only parts of the concept are addressed. Put simply, inclusion as participation is different from differentiating classroom teaching and learning (see Klette et al., 2018). Thus, it is necessary to critically examine how inclusive education can be both educationally and didactically managed in the future (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; Hamre, Hedegaard-Sørensen, & Langager, 2018).

The analysis showed that developing such an understanding is far more complex. Often, research into how policies are implemented or enacted emphasises the importance of

understanding what happens with these policies, as they meet the values of teachers (Ball et al., 2012; Schulte, 2018). However, educational policies, concepts and values do not reside in a vacuum, and inclusion is a good example to demonstrate this. Inclusion is a political aim given meaning to through values such as equality and justice. When it is made concrete in, however, it is mixed with values not only in the profession but also in public administration (Wennes & Busch, 2012). This combination has been greatly overlooked in studies of values in education. This analysis has thus contributed to a more differentiated understanding of how strategies reflect values that partly build on and partly contradict each other. Although such contradictions partly reflect normative conflicts that are partly unsolvable, an implication could be to unpack the clustering of values and increase awareness of such clusters to deal with normative concepts in teaching and teacher education, as well as among school leaders and municipal administrators. Political correctness towards inclusion is insufficient for establishing appropriate concepts and educational practices to pursue.

In conclusion, the clustering of values in local educational governance paints a picture where municipal administrators are responsible for taking several initiatives to strengthen inclusive education, but without being very specific in their approaches. They are enabled by their taking up of the values of the specific combination of autonomy and accountability. This cluster should be discussed critically, as it allocates a significant portion of the responsibility for achieving inclusive education to teachers and schools without necessarily giving them specific support and the necessary resources. Rather, the combination of these values often creates conflict, and an important question to ask is how municipal administrators handle this conflict and what this consequently means for governance. In the case of inclusion, how do administrators find the “right” balance of accountability pressure, autonomy and school development processes that enhance inclusive education for all? Such critical discussions should be addressed by policy-makers, both nationally and locally.

According to Ballard (2013), major changes in values and practices are required to achieve inclusive communities and education. If inclusion is mainly discussed in a context where all actors assume a common understanding of inclusion and additionally understand inclusive education in a practical and didactical way, analytical discussions of this concept are actually lacking at an institutional level, where such discussions should be present. As such, the mid-level of authority could also be seen as representing an impediment to inclusion in the sense that there is a mismatch between the concept of inclusion as appearing “in the abstract” and what happens when inclusion and its related public values are manifested in local governance, and in turn, educational practices.

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