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Bridging global ideals and local realities: navigating the complex path to inclusive education in the Faroe Islands

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Bridging global ideals and local realities: navigating the complex path to inclusive education in the Faroe Islands

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Abstract

This article investigates the complex process of adapting **Global North–driven principles of inclusive education** to the local circumstances of the Faroe Islands, a small and culturally distinct society in the North Atlantic. Drawing on situational analysis and a holistic, ecological approach to inclusion the study examines how international ideas of equity and participation are interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes even resisted within the Faroese educational landscape. Based on extensive empirical research, including document analysis, school observations, and interviews with 97 stakeholders across multiple levels of the education system, the findings reveal that inclusive education in the Faroe Islands is still in an emergent phase. The study highlights significant barriers to progress, including the absence of political leadership, limited structural support, and a lack of coherent school policy frameworks. These challenges are deeply shaped by the country's unique sociopolitical dynamics, including its postcolonial ties to Denmark, traditional conservative cultural values, and the intimate scale of its society. At the same time, the research identifies opportunities for development through the mobilisation of local knowledge, civic engagement, and professional reflection. By situating the Faroese experience within broader Arctic and Northern contexts, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on educational transformation and social justice. It offers insights into how small-scale societies might localise global inclusive education goals in ways that are both ethically grounded and culturally responsive.

Keywords: inclusive education, global-local dynamics, Faroe Islands, global north, situational analysis

Introduction

Inclusive education is widely recognised as both a moral imperative and a strategic pathway toward achieving equity and social justice in schools (Dyson, 1999; Ainscow et al., 2003). Grounded in key international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities UNCRPD (2006), inclusion has become a global reference point for educational reform. However, what counts as 'inclusive education' is not uncontested. Much of the dominant discourse has been shaped by Global North perspectives, while scholars and policymakers in the Global South have also engaged with and reinterpreted these principles in relation to their own social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g. Miles and Singal, 2010). Yet, turning these ideals into meaningful local practice remains complex, particularly in small, culturally distinct societies such as the Faroe Islands. With a population of approximately 54,800 (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2025) spread across 18 islands in the North Atlantic, the Faroe Islands offer a unique lens through which to examine how global inclusive principles interact with local educational structures, political dynamics, and cultural values. While inclusion is increasingly referenced in international discourse, it is still only marginally present in Faroese school legislation, policy planning, and professional dialogue (Poulsen, 2023; Vijayarathan-R and Óskarsdóttir, 2023). This results in a disjuncture between normative aspirations and practical transformation shaped by the islands' small-scale governance, relational community fabric, and evolving institutional capacity.

This article builds on findings from a broader study exploring inclusive education in the Faroese public school system (Poulsen, 2023), drawing on a Situational Analysis (SA) methodology (Clarke et al., 2018) and an ecological approach to inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Mitchell, 2018; Anderson et al., 2014). Based on an extensive empirical dataset including policy documents, school observations, and interviews with 97 stakeholders, the research examines how global ideas are translated, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in everyday practice.

The study positions inclusive education as a journey from policy vision to practice, shaped by tensions between special and general education provisions and influenced by broader Nordic and international trends, especially from Denmark. Consistent with earlier research (Slee, 2013; Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Haug, 2017) this study recognises that inclusion lacks a single, universally accepted definition. Still, it adopts a broad conceptualisation rooted in the work of Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), which emphasises restructuring schools to enable the participation, presence, and learning of all students, especially those at risk of exclusion.

The Faroe Islands' status as a self-governing nation within the Kingdom of Denmark adds complexity to the educational landscape. Although the Faroese Parliament ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Føroya Løgting, 2009), this has not automatically translated into binding national legislation on inclusive education. While international conventions establish normative obligations, their incorporation into domestic law depends on political will, institutional capacity, and legislative processes. The absence of such incorporation in the Faroese case illustrates a gap between international commitments and national policy frameworks. While some recent policy documents hint at emerging awareness, a coherent, system-wide strategy is yet to be articulated. These gaps reflect a

wider cultural conservatism in Faroese society, even as it experiences increasing pluralism and shifting value systems (Gaini, 2015; Skorini et al., 2022).

Taking seriously Haug's (2017) argument that inclusion must be locally defined, this article situates inclusive education as a socially and culturally negotiated process. Rather than assuming that global models can be imported wholesale, it explores how inclusion is constructed in practice within the Faroese circumstances. In doing so, it contributes both to national policy discussions and to broader debates on educational transformation — not only in Arctic and Northern settings, but also in other small, postcolonial societies —demonstrating how small societies can critically and creatively localise global educational goals.

Framing inclusion: navigating global principles in local contexts

Inclusive education has long been established as a central aim in international educational policy, most notably through the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UNCRPD (2006). These frameworks promote inclusive education as both a fundamental human right and a foundation for equitable schooling. However, the translation of such global ideals into meaningful local action is rarely straightforward, particularly in a small, culturally specific society such as the Faroe Islands.

While there is broad international agreement on the importance of inclusion, its definition remains contested. Scholars frequently distinguish between narrow and broad conceptions of the term (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm, 2021; Haug, 2017). Narrow interpretations typically emphasise the placement of students with disabilities into mainstream settings (cf. Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Dyson, 1999). In contrast, broader perspectives stress the need to restructure educational systems to support the participation, presence, and learning of all students, particularly those at risk of marginalisation (Ainscow et al., 2006, Haug, 2017).

This study adopts the latter view, building on an ecological understanding of inclusion as articulated by Mitchell (2018), Ainscow (2020), and Anderson et al. (2014). From this perspective, inclusive education is not solely a question of access or resources but a complex, relational process shaped by interactions among individuals, institutions, and systemic structures. It requires attending not only to pedagogical and organisational practices but also to broader social, cultural, and political dynamics.

To examine how these dynamics unfold in the Faroese situation, this study employs SA (Clarke et al., 2018) as both a theoretical and methodological framework. Rooted in grounded theory but extending beyond its traditional focus on human actors, SA enables an exploration of the broader social worlds and arenas that shape a given educational situation. This includes policies, discourses, institutional routines, material conditions, and societal norms, all of which influence how inclusion is imagined and practised.

The study is further informed by scholarship on policy transfer, translation and transformation (Cowen, 2006; Cowen, 2009; Christensen and Ydesen, 2015) which highlights the interpretive and adaptive processes involved when global policy frameworks travel across borders. Rather than assuming a linear

transfer of ideas, this approach draws attention to how international principles are translated and transformed through local negotiations and interpretations.

The figure below illustrates this process in and between different spaces/arenas of global school policy, local school policy and local school practice being negotiated in the local culture.

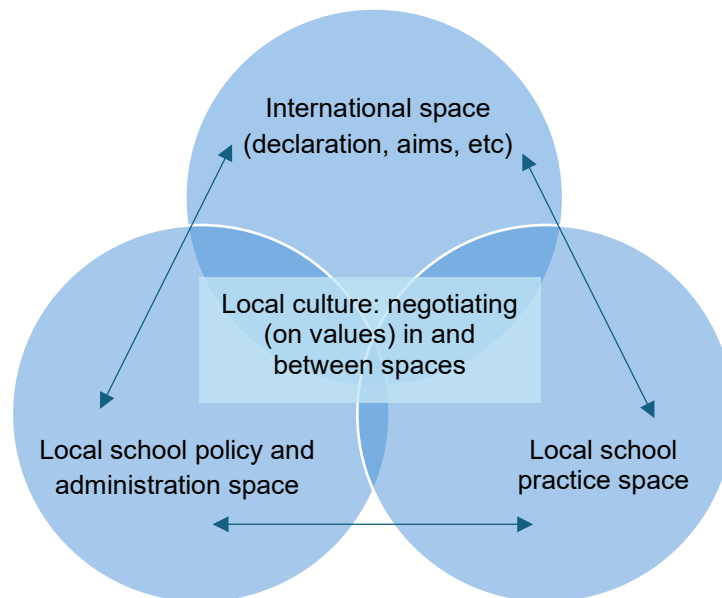


Figure 1: Transfer, Translate and Transform processes (Cowen, 2006; 2009) between international space, local school policy space and local school practice space, negotiated in the local culture (Christensen and Ydesen, 2015). Adopted from Poulsen, 2023

Together, these conceptual lenses—ecological inclusion, SA, and policy translation, offer a means of understanding how inclusive education develops in the Faroe Islands. They help trace the complex interplay between global discourses and local realities, revealing how inclusive ideals are accepted, reworked, or resisted in practice. This framing provides a foundation for analysing how inclusive education takes shape in a society marked by small-scale governance, strong cultural traditions, and ongoing social transformation. At the same time, the Faroese case resonates with other postcolonial contexts, including those in the Global South, where international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the UNCRPD have been variously adopted, adapted, or resisted in light of local sociopolitical and cultural conditions (e.g. Abdulrahman et al., 2021).

Methodological approach: situating inclusive education in the Faroese situation

As pointed out previously, this study adopts an ecological and interpretive lens to explore the development of inclusive education in the Faroe Islands and is grounded in SA (Clarke et al., 2018), a methodology designed to examine the complexity of social phenomena as they unfold within specific situations. SA offers a flexible, abductive framework well-suited to navigating the relationships, dynamics, and sometimes contradictory processes that characterise educational change, also in very small-scale societies.

In contrast to linear or hierarchical models of research, this approach recognises that inclusion is not a fixed endpoint but a 'becoming' process, emerging through interactions between actors, institutions, and discourses (Clarke et al., 2018; Allan, 2006; Slee, 2013). The methodology reflects a constructivist epistemology, viewing social reality as co-produced and situationally shaped (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Rather than seeking universal generalisations, the study aims to offer thick, situated interpretations of how global inclusive ideals are negotiated in the specific cultural and political landscape of the Faroes.

Multisite fieldwork and data generation

A multisite strategy was used to capture the distributed and relational character of inclusive education. Data were generated across six arenas and social worlds: public schools, the advisory/education sector, the administrative/political sector, labour unions, NGOs, and policy/legislation.

The figure below illustrates the empirical material, which was organised around six key arenas: schools, the advisory and education sector, administration, labour unions, NGOs, and policy documents.

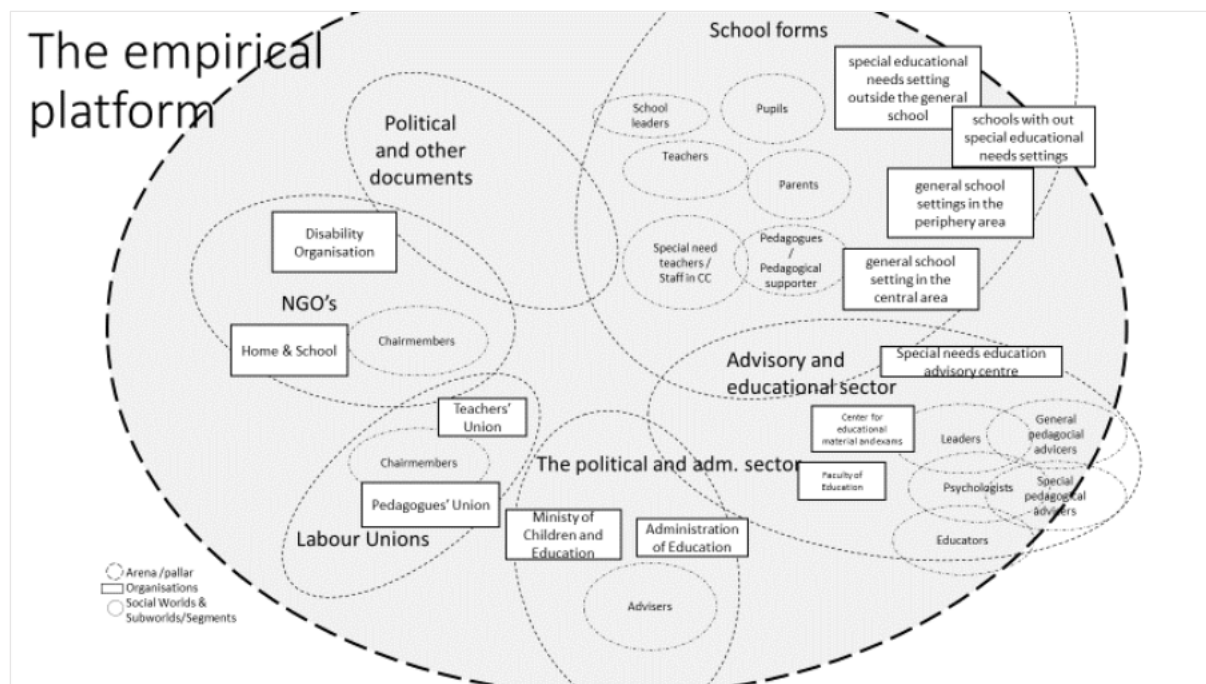


Figure 2: The empirical platform (adapted from Poulsen, 2023)

The fieldwork combined policy/document analysis, limited ethnographic observations, and 67 semi-structured interviews with 97 unique participants spanning pupils, teachers, school leaders, policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders. This article uses selected materials from a larger doctoral study (Poulsen, 2023), which is summarised in table 1.

Policy-document method. Policy and legislative texts were identified from three “mother documents” (Salamanca Statement, 1994; Public School Act/Fólkaskúalógin, 1997; UNCRPD, 2006—ratified for the Faroe Islands in 2009) and expanded via snowballing and targeted contacts. Using SA mapping, keywords (inclusion, equity, rights, support, special education) and silences/positional tensions were traced and then compared with the interview and observation data.

Table 1. Empirical data sources

Arena	Social worlds (roles)	Participants (n)
Schools (four forms: with/without SEN class; periphery; central area)	School leaders (incl. deputies)	15
	Special needs teachers (SEN settings + general settings)	12
	General teachers	4
	Pedagogues / pedagogical supporters	5
	Pupils (13 in general; 13 in SEN settings)	26
	Parents	12
Advisory and education sector	Leaders, lecturers, special advisers, psychologists (Sernám, Nám, Faculty of Education)	11
Administrative and political sector	Ministry/administration advisers	7
Labour unions and NGOs	Board members (Teachers' Union, Pedagogues' Union, MEGD, Home and School)	6
Interview total		67 interviews / 97 unique participants
School observations	Lessons, breaks, staff meetings, pupil-led tours	≈15 sessions across 6 schools
Policy/legislative corpus	Laws, curriculum, ministerial orders/notes, working-group reports, international conventions	12 core documents
Researcher materials	SA maps and analytic memos	≈100 pages of memos

Notes: (1) Category sums can exceed 97 because a few individuals held dual roles. (2) Most adult interviews were online during COVID; pupil interviews and school observations were on site after schools reopened.

Observations and informal interactions enriched the data, particularly when pupils guided school tours and shared their perspectives on inclusive practices. These embodied and dialogic encounters added depth to the data and illuminated the everyday realities of inclusion or its absence in schools.

Mapping as analytical practice

Mapping lies at the heart of SA. Rather than placing human actors at the centre, SA takes the situation itself, comprising human and non-human elements, as the primary unit of analysis. The mapping process unfolded across several stages, beginning with a "messy map" of all elements potentially shaping inclusive education in the Faroes. From this, situational, relational, and positional maps were created, enabling analytical exploration of tensions, patterns, and silences.

This mapping allowed for a systematic interrogation of how inclusion is interpreted, enacted, or resisted across different arenas and social worlds. Importantly, mapping was not a static exercise but a reflexive and generative process, constantly evolving in dialogue with the empirical material.

Reflexivity and situated knowledge production

As a Faroese researcher embedded in the situation under study, I was both an insider and an investigator. This dual position offered unique access to participants and nuanced understanding but also raised important questions about bias and positionality. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process through memo-writing, interdisciplinary supervision, and ongoing critical engagement with participants and colleagues. As one participant asked, “What hat are you wearing today?”—a reminder of the multiple roles and responsibilities carried in small-scale research environments.

Drawing on Clarke et al.’s (2018) view of the researcher as part of the situation, I embraced the notion that knowledge is always partial and contingent (Hastrup, 2010). Rather than seeking detachment, I aimed to remain transparent and accountable, using reflexive tools such as thematic workshops and peer dialogue to cross-check interpretations and surface blind spots.

Ethical considerations in a small society

Ethical navigation was essential in a situation marked by close-knit communities and overlapping relationships. A relational ethics framework (Hayfield, 2022) guided the research, foregrounding respect, transparency, and sensitivity. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data protection measures were implemented in collaboration with the Faroese Data Protection Agency.

Special attention was given to the risks of relational entanglement and role confusion. Through careful selection of participants and ongoing clarification of the researcher’s role, these risks were mitigated while acknowledging that ethical complexities cannot be fully eliminated in small-society research.

Constructing the analytical landscape

This study adopts an analytical strategy grounded in a situational and post-structuralist epistemology, where analysis is understood not as uncovering objective truths but as a process of meaning-making. Rather than seeking universal categories or stable definitions, the analysis aims to explore how inclusive education is enacted, interpreted, and resisted in the situated context of the Faroe Islands. Central to this work is the methodological framework of SA (Clarke et al., 2018), which supports an ecological reading of social complexity (Mitchell, 2018) and foregrounds the relational nature of educational development (Ainscow, 2020).

The analytical process builds upon an abductive logic, where empirical material and conceptual frameworks are developed in dialogue. Through multiple iterations of mapping situational, relational, and positional, the empirical material was interrogated to identify patterns, contradictions, silences, and emergent themes. Informed by Clarke et al. (2018), this mapping allowed for a thick interpretation of the data, attending to human and non-human actants, discourses, and institutional logics that co-constitute the situation of inclusive education.

Mapping was employed as both an organisational and generative tool. Initial “messy maps” a core technique in SA (Clarke et al., 2018) - were used to gather and visualise the wide range of elements shaping the development of inclusive education. These maps are intentionally open-ended and non-hierarchical, allowing complexity and contradictions to surface before moving toward more structured representations. These maps were not static but evolved throughout the research, informing the

construction of thematic nodes and sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969). Inspired by (MacLure, 2013) notion of 'glowing data', themes were identified not by frequency but by their intensity, provocation, and analytical relevance. They acted as guiding threads through the empirical complexity, allowing for both depth and fluidity in interpretation.

Given the scope and diversity of the data, NVivo software was used as a technical scaffold to support organisation and traceability. While SA does not prescribe coding, NVivo facilitated the clustering of material into cases and themes, allowing the research to remain grounded in the empirical platform while enabling abductive movement across levels of interpretation. Themes were associated with specific social worlds, such as school leadership, policy-making, and classroom practices, as well as transversal issues like pupil voice and professional learning.

Through this iterative and reflexive process, eight overarching analytical nodes were developed: invisibility, knowledge, coherency, lonely planets, dilemmas, reforms, attitudes, and children's rights. These nodes were not intended as definitive categories but as interpretive lenses, helping to bring the empirical material into sharper focus. Through iterative mapping and abductive analysis, they were clustered into thematic constellations. For example, *invisibility* and *children's rights* informed the theme of policy silences; *reforms* and *coherency* connected to debates on governance; *attitudes* and *dilemmas* illuminated tensions in professional practice; and *lonely planets* reflected fragmented experiences at the school level. Table 2 makes these connections explicit, showing how the nodes underpin the broader themes that structure the analysis.

Table 2. From analytical nodes to themes (*adapted from Poulsen, 2023*)

Analytical themes (section headings)	Underpinning nodes
Policy and practice – inclusive education in the making	<i>Reforms, coherency, knowledge, children's rights</i>
Negotiating inclusion – cultural landscapes and local practice	<i>Attitudes, dilemmas, invisibility</i>
Tradition in transition: cultural foundations	<i>Attitudes, children's rights, knowledge</i>
Inclusive principles in local school culture	<i>Lonely planets, invisibility, reforms</i>
Negotiating values and tensions	<i>Attitudes, dilemmas, children's rights</i>
Closeness and silence in a small society	<i>Invisibility, lonely planets, coherency</i>
Emerging pathways	<i>Attitudes, reforms, children's rights</i>

These constellations provide the foundation for the analytical themes and section headings that follow. In this way, the coding process is made visible and traceable, while still allowing for interpretive depth. The nodes were not intended as definitive categories but as interpretive lenses, helping to bring the empirical material into sharper focus. Each of the following subsections elaborates one of these thematic constellations (Table 2), tracing how the eight analytical nodes were clustered into broader

themes and providing a coherent structure for examining how inclusive education is shaped across policy, professional practice, school culture, and pupil experience.

Analytical orientation and structure of the findings

The following analysis presents a situated narrative of how inclusive education is taking shape in the Faroese context. Rather than following a linear logic, the analysis reflects the rhizomatic structure of the mapping process, where themes intersect across policy, practice, and cultural experience.

The findings are organised to reflect the layered character of the empirical material: beginning with policy and administrative perspectives, moving through school-level dynamics and cultural negotiations, and concluding with emerging signs of change. This structure mirrors how inclusion is experienced, as a negotiated process shaped by global ideals, local interpretations, and lived relationships.

Policy and practice – inclusive education in the making

This section initiates the analysis by examining how inclusive education is addressed—explicitly or implicitly—within the structures of policy and administration in the Faroese school system. Rather than presenting inclusion as a fixed objective, the discussion explores how it is shaped by shifting priorities, interpretive practices, and the institutional logics that underpin governance and decision-making (Ball et al., 2012).

Drawing from the thematic insights developed through the analytical process—particularly across the nodes of attitudes, children’s rights, knowledge, invisibility, reforms, dilemmas, lonely planets, and coherence—this section presents findings that show how inclusive principles are negotiated in a context marked by limited school policy leadership, strong cultural continuity, and the absence of formal guidance.

By focusing on the interplay between formal frameworks and everyday administrative reasoning, the analysis highlights the complexities of enacting inclusive education in a system where normative aspirations often outpace structural articulation. The section sets the stage for tracing how these dynamics cascade through other arenas of practice in the sections that follow.

Central to this is the concept of *policy enactment* (Ball et al., 2012), understood not merely as the implementation of top-down directives but as a negotiated process shaped by local conditions, informal dynamics, and pragmatic decisions. This is particularly relevant in the Faroe Islands, where policy making is influenced by the interweaving of personal relationships, limited administrative capacity, and historical dependencies on Danish educational frameworks (Baldacchino and Veenendaal, 2018; Sutton, 2007).

Despite a national ethos of equity and solidarity, inclusive education remains only marginally present in core legislation and policy. The Public School Act (Fólkaskúalógin, 1997) does not mention inclusion explicitly, and the national curriculum makes no direct reference to inclusive pedagogical strategies (Námsætlanir fyri fólkaskúlan, 2011). This absence results in a fragmented policy landscape in which inclusive values are often inferred rather than clearly articulated.

As one administrator observed:

The word inclusion isn't in our law, but I believe the intention is there—somewhere. Still, it's difficult to work towards something that isn't clearly defined. Everyone interprets it their own way. (Participant - administrative, political, advisory and educational sector)

This sentiment reflects a broader theme of ambiguity in governance, where policy direction is frequently described as informal and highly reliant on individual interpretation:

There's a lot of talk about inclusion, but what does it mean? We don't have guidelines or a strategy from the Ministry, so we end up doing what we think is best in our own schools. (School leader)

Actors in the field often operate within this ambiguity, trying to reconcile traditional values with newer, often externally driven, inclusive ideals. The silence surrounding inclusion in key policy texts is not neutral—it actively shapes how inclusion is (not) enacted in practice. This silence leads to a governance model that might be described as *leading through others*, wherein change is expected to emerge from below rather than be directed from above.

As one policy actor explained:

We try not to govern too tightly. We prefer to support and encourage schools to find their own way. But it can backfire—some schools do a lot, others do almost nothing. There's no common direction. (Participant - administrative, political, advisory and educational sector)

This governance style, while offering flexibility and room for innovation, has also led to tensions and inconsistencies across the system. Although schools operate within a formally centralised system, the practical responsibility for inclusive education is often left to individual schools, which can lead to a patchwork of practices with no unifying framework.

It's like each school is its own little planet. We all orbit in the same system, but we rarely align. Inclusion means different things in different places, and some just don't address it at all. (Teacher in general school)

This situation raises important questions about the role of legislation, leadership, and vision in the development of inclusive education. Without a clear mandate or shared understanding, the inclusive school risks remaining an aspirational ideal rather than a coordinated system-wide practice.

We've talked for years about making schools more inclusive, but I've yet to see a concrete plan. We need something to guide us—otherwise, we just spin our wheels. (Participant - administrative, political, advisory and educational sector)

In summary, the findings point to a governance approach that oscillates between decentralised encouragement and strategic vagueness, which can hinder coherence and sustainability in inclusive education development. This policy ambiguity, shaped by the socio-political situation of the Faroe Islands, highlights the complexities of translating global educational ideals into local systems, especially within small-scale societies.

The following sections will examine how these policy dynamics manifest in schools and other arenas, exploring the everyday negotiations of inclusive values, dilemmas, and practices by educators, leaders, and support services.

Negotiating inclusion – cultural landscapes and local practice

Following the examination of how inclusive education is positioned within Faroese policy and administration, this section shifts focus to the cultural platform shaping everyday school practice. While not a cultural analysis per se, it acknowledges that inclusive education cannot be meaningfully analysed without recognising the values, traditions, and social dynamics of the Faroese situation — dynamics that are especially pronounced in very small societies, where close-knit relations and limited institutional layers strongly shape educational practice (Baldacchino, 2019). In particular, the analysis foregrounds the process of negotiation of values, identities, and meanings that mediates the transfer, translation, and transformation of global inclusive ideals into local educational practice.

Rather than a linear diffusion of policy from international organisations to national frameworks and local enactments, this analysis draws on Cowen's (2006, 2009) notion of educational systems as 'compressed political messages'. These messages, when filtered through the dense fabric of Faroese cultural life, undergo negotiation and adaptation rather than direct adoption. As one school leader explained:

Sometimes I feel like we are on our own planet. Each school finds its own way, and there is no common guidance or support. (School leader)

This reflects the fragmentation and isolation described in the analytical node of "lonely planets", while also highlighting how structural gaps are experienced at the ground level.

This points to a more rhizomatic understanding of change, as global norms interact with local logics in nonlinear, multi-sited processes (Ydesen and Christensen, 2015). A teacher echoed this tension, noting:

We don't really use the word 'inclusion'. Maybe we say we are giving children space, but then the topic disappears again, and nothing changes. (Teacher)

Here, the language of inclusion itself appears fragile, with international rights-based concepts translated into softer, less confrontational local terms — a pattern that contributes to the "invisibility" of inclusion in everyday practice.

A clear example of this negotiation can be seen in recent public discourse surrounding ethically charged and politically sensitive topics such as reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ recognition (see e.g. Kringvarp Føroya, 2022). Although these issues may appear distant from the realm of education, they reflect broader societal shifts in the Faroe Islands, shifts that challenge established norms and introduce rights-based perspectives into public debate. These debates expose a tension between traditional ethical narratives and the relative silence surrounding the everyday realities of marginalised groups, including children with disabilities. This dissonance points to how inclusive education is entangled with broader cultural and political dynamics, rather than being solely a pedagogical or administrative concern.

Simultaneously, there are emerging signs of civic engagement, particularly from parents and professionals advocating for the rights and needs of children who struggle in the current school system. These efforts reflect a growing awareness and public articulation of the gaps in support, as well as a call for more responsive and transparent governance in education. Such developments signal a shift in how inclusion is perceived, not only as a matter of educational reform but as a collective social responsibility rooted in lived experience and democratic participation.

These developments reflect a growing discontent with longstanding silences and a strengthening demand for transparency and accountability in educational governance. Rather than serving merely as a backdrop, these civic and cultural dynamics actively shape how inclusive education is understood and negotiated in the Faroese context. Inclusion here is not a settled or universally endorsed concept, but emerges as a site of tension, shaped by conflicting values and social expectations. The process involves navigating between enduring norms and shifting ideals, between the intimacy of close-knit communities and the formality of institutional structures, between intuitive practices and the call for structured policy. As the following sections will show, these tensions surface in the everyday actions, dilemmas, and interpretations of educators, leaders, families, and students, revealing how inclusive education is being reimagined amid broader societal transitions.

Tradition in transition: cultural foundations of inclusive education

The cultural landscape of the Faroe Islands provides a necessary lens through which inclusive education must be understood. While the Faroe Islands are often grouped with the Nordic countries in terms of welfare systems and educational models (Jákupsstovu, 2007), their development in terms of inclusive education has followed a markedly different trajectory (Poulsen, 2023). This divergence invites critical reflection: why has inclusive education been slower to emerge in the Faroese context? What cultural conditions are influencing this pathway?

Several researchers (e.g. Gaini, 2015; Skorini et al., 2022) suggest that the Faroe Islands are undergoing a cultural and political value shift—a tension between deeply rooted Christian conservatism and increasing secularisation and liberalisation. This societal transformation reflects a broader value-political culture battle, as old norms are challenged by newer, rights-based perspectives.

Inclusive education, grounded in principles of equity, diversity, and human rights, enters this cultural landscape as both a disruptor and a mirror. As one participant in the study noted:

Inclusion is not just about the children; it's about our values as a society. When we say 'all children have a right to be in school,' it challenges how we have always done things—quietly, traditionally, and without asking too many questions. (School leader)

This reflection points to the cultural negotiation required for inclusion to take root. It is not enough to write policy or provide resources, there must also be a cultural readiness to engage with difference, to confront stigma, and to open space for critical dialogue.

Tensions between progressive and conservative values increasingly shape the broader cultural context in which inclusive education is negotiated in the Faroe Islands. Ethical debates over care, rights, and

responsibility—whether in health, social services, or education—reveal persistent divisions over how society should respond to vulnerability and difference. These tensions are not limited to formal policy arenas but circulate through public discourse, institutional practices, and everyday interactions.

In this landscape, inclusive education becomes more than a pedagogical reform; it emerges as a contested cultural project. Competing visions, some rooted in traditional moral frameworks, others informed by evolving rights-based perspectives, shape how inclusion is understood, resisted, or reimagined. This results in a situation where inclusive principles may be rhetorically acknowledged but struggle to find consistent expression in policy or practice.

At the same time, shifts are occurring. Civil society actors, including parents and advocacy groups, are beginning to articulate demands for more equitable and responsive education. These emerging voices express concern over a lack of institutional attention to pupils who struggle in mainstream settings and highlight the need for more structured, inclusive approaches. Such perspectives challenge the status quo and signal a growing expectation that educational systems must do more than accommodate difference; they must actively recognise, support and build on difference.

Their testimony is echoed in interviews conducted for this study. One parent explained:

I feel alone. My child doesn't fit the system, and the school blames us. But no one has offered any support, advice, or even acknowledgement. (Parent)

These voices show that culture is not static; it is being renegotiated by actors who refuse silence and are demanding visibility and recognition.

Yet, despite these emerging shifts, the traditional cultural code, marked by silence, closeness, and community conformity, still exerts a strong gravitational pull. Many teachers and school leaders reported reluctance to use the term 'inclusion' in staffrooms or official discussions:

Inclusion is not a word we use. Not really. Maybe we talk about 'being spacious' or 'giving room,' but even that is rare. (Teacher)

This suggests that the idea of inclusion is not absent from Faroese education, it is unnamed, embedded in tacit understandings, or fragmented across informal practices. It becomes clear that fostering inclusive education in the Faroe Islands is not only about structural change, but also about shifting cultural narratives.

The ongoing tension between tradition and transformation, visibility and silence, community loyalty and individual rights, forms the cultural platform on which inclusive education must be built. As the next sections will show, this platform simultaneously enables and constrains action. But crucially, it is in flux, and in that flux lies the opportunity for inclusive education to emerge not as an imported ideal, but as a locally negotiated, ethically grounded practice.

Inclusive principles meet the local school culture

While formal references to inclusive education may be sparse in Faroese legislation and policy documents, the ideals of inclusion are nonetheless beginning to make their way into the local school

culture—albeit in fragmented and indirect ways. This subsection explores how the global discourse on inclusion is received, interpreted, and negotiated within the microcosm of Faroese school life.

Despite the lack of an overarching policy framework, many educators have been exposed to inclusive principles through training abroad, particularly in Denmark, where inclusion is a more established part of teacher education. Upon returning home, these teachers often experience a cultural disconnect between the values they were taught and the prevailing norms within Faroese schools.

One such teacher described this experience in an interview:

When I was studying in Denmark, every assignment had to include inclusion. You could not escape it. And then I came home, and I have not heard much about it. The word is just not used. Maybe we talk about being 'spacious,' but not really even that. It's like these ideas don't exist here. (Teacher)

This quote highlights not just a gap in terminology, but a broader absence of discourse. Without a shared language or formal structures for inclusion, the responsibility for interpreting and enacting inclusive values falls to individual actors, many of whom feel ill-equipped and unsupported in this endeavour.

The same teacher went on to describe the challenges of working towards inclusion without systemic backing:

"The authorities must go in front and show us the way. School leaders and others should do the same. We, the teachers and pedagogues, need guidelines. You can't be just one or two people trying to fight for this. There's too much working against you. It becomes too heavy." (Teacher 28)

These accounts illustrate a central tension in the Faroese context: while some educators are committed to inclusive practices, their efforts are often isolated and lack institutional support. In many cases, what exists is a form of "silent inclusion"—practices that align with inclusive values but are not identified as such, nor systematically supported or shared.

This silence is not necessarily a sign of resistance but rather of cultural embeddedness. In close-knit communities, where schooling has historically been interwoven with family and community life, pedagogical practices are often guided by intuition, tradition, and tacit norms rather than explicit policies or theoretical frameworks (Abdulrahman et al., 2021, Crossley, 2010). This cultural orientation can be both a strength and a limitation: it fosters strong relational ties and a deep sense of community, but it can also hinder critical reflection and innovation.

Nonetheless, there are emerging signs that the inclusive principles are beginning to challenge and reshape these local traditions. The newly established parent organisation *Sólarljós*, for instance, brings visibility to students whose needs have been historically overlooked, creating a space for dialogue and advocacy. Similarly, teachers with international training bring new language and pedagogical strategies that slowly influence the broader school culture.

These developments suggest that inclusive education in the Faroe Islands is not absent; it is emergent, relational, and culturally negotiated. As such, it cannot be imposed from above or imported wholesale.

Rather, it must be co-constructed through local dialogue, reflective practice, and sustained engagement with both global ideals and community realities.

The next subsection will explore how this cultural negotiation plays out more explicitly in the form of value conflicts and oppositional forces within the school and society, which can be understood as a battle over values.

Negotiating values

As inclusive education principles begin to seep into Faroese schools, they do so not into a neutral space but into a cultural landscape marked by value conflicts and shifting social norms. This section explores how inclusion is caught up in broader cultural and ideological struggles, particularly between traditional and progressive worldviews, as the Faroese society in many ways finds itself at a crossroads between tradition and modernity (Gaini, 2013). The cultural landscape of the Faroe Islands remains strongly shaped by conservative Christian traditions, with family, church, and community life historically providing the main frameworks for education and socialisation (Gaini, 2013, Jákupsstovu, 2007). Everyday interactions in schools continue to reflect this close-knit and tradition-oriented ethos, where tacit norms and community expectations guide practice. At the same time, the islands are increasingly exposed to global discourses on diversity, human rights, and equality. These competing forces create what Skorini et al. (2022, p.88) describe as a “culture in the middle of a value-political culture battle”, where “old norms are being challenged by new demands”. The educational system, as a reflection of this broader society, becomes a battleground for these tensions. Inclusive education, imbued with ethical discourses on justice, equity, and human rights, is not only an educational reform but a cultural challenge. As one parent put it during an interview:

The school and the school board are in the middle of an identity crisis. We've never had this much uncertainty about what the school is for, or what it should be doing. (Parent)

This sense of identity crisis illustrates how debates around inclusion cannot be separated from fundamental questions about the purpose of education. Is school primarily a space for transmitting knowledge, or should it also be a space for care, community, and the development of social competencies? The friction between these different perspectives is palpable in the empirical material.

A teacher explained this friction in terms of changing expectations and roles:

There's been too much focus on the social aspects, they say. The subject knowledge is fading. Some want to return to the old school, with authority and structure. But others are pushing for more attention to the pupils' well-being. It's like we're in a tug-of-war about what school is supposed to be. (Teacher)

This tug-of-war is not only generational or ideological, it also plays out in concrete pedagogical practices and resource allocations. As expectations grow for schools to address both academic achievement and social-emotional development, teachers feel pulled in multiple directions, often without the necessary support or training. One teacher noted:

You want to do it all—care for well-being, ensure they learn—but the more you try, the more impossible it feels. It's overwhelming. (Teacher)

Amid these tensions, inclusive education can be misinterpreted or reduced to mere care work, something soft, emotional, and less professional. Teachers who advocate for inclusion are sometimes viewed as “the caring type,” rather than as professionals engaged in complex pedagogical work. A special needs teacher reflected on this dynamic:

When you're interested in inclusion, people think you're just being soft. That's about caring too much. But it's not. It's about structure, about knowing what you're doing. It's about rights, not just kindness. (Special needs teacher)

Such comments reveal how inclusion is often caught between ethical intentions and structural realities. The discourse of inclusion is welcomed in theory but struggles to take root in daily practice due to ambiguous mandates, limited resources, and prevailing cultural attitudes. The result is a patchwork landscape where some schools or teachers make significant strides toward inclusion, while others remain entrenched in more traditional, exclusionary practices.

At the same time, broader societal debates such as those surrounding reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and gender equality are increasingly reflected in educational discourse. These debates reveal how deeply ethical and religious values intersect with schooling, framing inclusion not merely as a pedagogical concern but as a reflection of shifting cultural norms in Faroese society. As new civic voices emerge and younger educators introduce perspectives shaped by international training, these value tensions are likely to intensify. The key question, then, is not only whether inclusion will be transformed, but how it will be interpreted: as a formal obligation, a moral commitment, or a contested cultural project.

In the next subsection, we delve deeper into how these value tensions are shaped by the unique social dynamics of smallness, where closeness, distance, and silence become defining features of professional and pedagogical life.

Negotiating inclusion in a culture of closeness and silence

The Faroe Islands' small-scale societal structure deeply influences how inclusive education is both imagined and enacted. In a culture where most people are connected through familial, social, or professional ties, closeness offers familiarity, care, and support, but it also brings distinct limitations. This subsection explores how the dynamics of closeness, distance, and silence shape professional relationships, pedagogical practices, and institutional change in the context of inclusive education.

Closeness in small societies can facilitate relational pedagogy and strong networks of informal support. Teachers and students often know each other outside the classroom, and school staff share overlapping social roles. This proximity may foster attentiveness and emotional investment. As one teacher noted:

You know the families, you know the children before they even start school. That helps a lot when you try to support them. You're not just a teacher—you're part of their lives. (Teacher)

However, this same closeness may lead to blurred boundaries, professional hesitation, and a reluctance to engage in conflict or challenge norms. Participants described how raising concerns about a colleague's practice or a school policy could feel deeply personal and socially risky. One pedagogue explained:

You don't want to be the one to cause trouble. If you speak up, you might hurt someone you have to sit next to at a birthday party next weekend. (Pedagogue)

In this way, closeness can become a barrier to critical dialogue and innovation. Silence emerges not merely as a lack of communication, but as a form of social navigation, an adaptive strategy for maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict. This cultural tendency toward silence was frequently described by participants as both protective and repressive. A municipal advisor shared:

People avoid talking about difficult things. It's easier to say nothing than to risk confrontation. But in the end, that silence holds everything in place—nothing changes. (Participant in the administrative, political, advisory and educational sector)

Silence also manifests in the institutional handling of difference. Rather than openly discussing children's diverse needs or structural exclusion, there may be a tacit agreement to 'get by' without naming the issues. As a school leader reflected:

We don't talk about inclusion. We solve things quietly, case by case. That works sometimes—but it also means we don't learn from each other. There's no shared understanding, no development. (School leader)

This reflection resonates with Norwich's (2008, 2013) *dilemma of difference*: while avoiding formalised language of inclusion can prevent children being labelled, it also limits opportunities for collective learning and the establishment of rights-based protections. Similarly, Goodley et al.'s (2016) discussion of *dishumanism* reminds us that categories like 'inclusion' are never neutral; they can both empower and constrain. The Faroese practice of silence, then, highlights the tension between maintaining community harmony and ensuring structural recognition of children's diverse needs.

Distance, paradoxically present in a close-knit society, refers to the emotional, cognitive, or institutional space maintained between actors and issues that are considered uncomfortable or controversial. This distancing allows for the preservation of appearances but undermines collective responsibility. Teachers may distance themselves from pupils' challenges by framing them as the responsibility of specialists or parents. Administrators may delegate decisions downward, avoiding direct engagement with systemic inequalities.

Hints of change are visible in the emerging cracks in this silent consensus. The formation of advocacy groups like Sólarljós, the use of social media to share stories of exclusion and growing demands for transparency and professional accountability suggest a cultural shift. Educators, trained abroad or exposed to alternative pedagogical models, often express a desire to "name things more clearly" and develop shared language for inclusion.

Still, change in a culture of smallness is slow and complex. The interwoven nature of personal and professional life makes conflict costly and silence tempting. As this subsection has shown, the forces of closeness, distance, and silence are not easily untangled, they both constrain and enable the development of inclusive education.

Understanding these cultural dynamics is essential to moving forward. Inclusion in the Faroese situation must be built not only through policy or professional training but through the careful negotiation of social relationships and the courageous breaking of silences. This calls for collective reflection, institutional courage, and the willingness to transform not only practices but the culture in which those practices are embedded.

Emerging pathways: signs of inclusive transformation

Despite the cultural tensions, structural gaps, and policy ambiguities outlined in previous sections, the research also reveals emerging signals of inclusive development within the Faroese school system. These 'hints' may not yet amount to systemic transformation, but they point to a shifting educational landscape where inclusive ideals are beginning to find traction through changing attitudes, emerging reforms, and a renewed sense of professionalism among educators.

One such sign is a subtle but growing change in how teachers understand their professional identity. As schools navigate the complex terrain of inclusion, many educators are beginning to view inclusion not simply as an added responsibility but as an intrinsic part of being a good teacher. This echoes Florian's (2014) work on inclusive pedagogy, which emphasises that inclusion is integral to the professional identity of all teachers. As one teacher shared:

Before, I thought inclusion was just about special needs. But now I see it's more than that—it's about how I meet every child, every day. It's not a task—it's my approach. (Teacher)

This evolution in professional self-understanding signals a broader cultural shift. Inclusion is increasingly seen as part of pedagogical quality, not an external or specialised add-on. It reflects a movement toward what Mitchell (2018) and Ainscow (2020) describe as the ecological responsibility of educators, not just to teach, but to adapt, collaborate, and create space for all learners.

Similarly, attitude change among school leaders and policymakers is beginning to surface, often driven by personal experiences or sustained exposure to inclusive discourse. Some leaders are rethinking traditional hierarchical models of schooling and experimenting with more collaborative, student-centred approaches. One school principal explained:

We're slowly moving away from the idea that the teacher knows best. Inclusion requires listening—not only to colleagues but to the students. That's the biggest change: we're starting to ask, 'How are you experiencing school?' (School leader)

Such shifts in mindset are not always visible in official policies but emerge through everyday decisions, staffroom discussions, and the micro-politics of school life. In many cases, these changes are facilitated by informal networks and what one teacher described as 'silent alliances' among colleagues who share a commitment to inclusive values but operate beneath the radar of formal mandates.

Additionally, there are indications of policy-level reforms that, while modest, suggest an emerging political will to address inclusion (Barna- og útbúgvingarmálaráðið, 2024). The inclusion of inclusive terminology in recent strategic documents (Knudsen et al., 2023; Lydersen et al., 2023), growing attention to students' mental health and well-being, and the piloting of inter-professional support teams in some schools all reflect a slow but discernible movement toward system-level change. This shift may be driven in part by increased visibility of student well-being concerns — for example, the *Wellbeing in the Faroese Compulsory Schools 2023* report documents rising attention to mental health issues among pupils (Kák et al., 2023). Coupled with civic pressure and advocacy, this has created a more favourable policy climate in which inclusion can gradually be given official space.

These reforms remain fragile and uneven, and many are still in the trial phase. However, they represent important footholds, experiments that could pave the way for a more coherent and robust inclusive education policy if given adequate support, visibility, and evaluation.

Finally, the voices of students themselves offer perhaps the clearest sign of inclusive development. In pupil interviews, children expressed a strong sense of justice, care, and peer solidarity. Many articulated what could be termed 'intuitive inclusion'—a desire to ensure everyone is welcome and treated fairly, even if they lack the vocabulary to name it as such. One pupil explained:

I think we should help each other more. Sometimes kids are left alone, and the teacher doesn't see. But we see. We know who needs a friend. (Pupil)

These student perspectives reflect a moral compass already aligned with the values of inclusion. Supporting this instinct through formal education and institutional practices could be a powerful lever for future development.

Taken together, these hints, professional identity shifts, attitudinal changes, policy signals, and student perspectives suggest that inclusive education is not only a challenge in the Faroese situation but also an emerging possibility. These developments may still be partial and uneven, but they indicate that the seeds of inclusive reform are being sown quietly, locally, and relationally.

Conclusion: inclusive education as a situated possibility

This article has explored the emergence of inclusive education in the Faroe Islands, situated within the wider interplay of global principles and local conditions. Drawing on empirical insights, policy, and cultural perspectives, the study has shown that inclusion is not a clearly defined endpoint, but an unfolding and contested process, shaped by silence as much as by speech, and by tradition as much as by transformation.

The analysis revealed how inclusive education remains weakly embedded in legislation, policy, and professional infrastructure. In the absence of clear strategic direction, much of the responsibility for interpreting and implementing inclusion falls to individual schools—leading to fragmented approaches and uneven support. Cultural norms rooted in closeness and conflict avoidance further complicate the visibility of exclusion and the articulation of rights.

Yet, despite these limitations, the study also identified signs of movement. Teachers are reimagining their professional roles; children are expressing a sense of fairness and peer solidarity; and informal networks of educators and families are voicing new expectations. These developments, while modest and emergent, signal the potential for inclusive education to take root, not as a formalised blueprint, but as a relational and locally negotiated practice.

The Faroese situation, marked by its small scale, cultural continuity, and strong interpersonal ties offers both affordances and constraints for inclusion. While closeness can foster trust and care, it can also produce silence and stasis. Recognising this duality is key: not to overcome the 'culture of smallness', but to engage with it as a condition that requires sensitive, situational-aware responses.

This research contributes to a broader understanding of inclusion as a situated, relational process. It underscores that inclusive education in small systems cannot be imported wholesale, nor reduced to technical reform. Rather, it must be co-constructed through shared responsibility, cultural reflection, and ethical commitment. Ultimately, the Faroese experience invites educators, policymakers, and researchers to view inclusion not only as a legal or structural goal, but as a continuous practice of becoming—attuned to the specific dynamics of place, shaped by everyday decisions, and animated by the possibility of a more just and participatory educational future.

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