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BY
IDA ANDREA NILSSON

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To my brother, Karl

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Inclusive education today seems stuck in a cycle of skepticism and criticism, with its promise of more inclusive schools for all children overshadowed by systemic challenges and perceived failures. Originally, inclusive education aimed to create a sense of belonging and reduce exclusion for all students, as outlined in frameworks like the Salamanca Statement. However, translating this vision into practice has proven difficult, underscoring the need for new perspectives that not only question the status quo but also rethink how we understand and enact inclusive education – laying the groundwork for renewed efforts. In response, the dissertation seeks to re-emphasize inclusive education as a structural, transformative approach that creates space for all students' participation and learning. To address these complexities and reimagine inclusion, the study draws on critical disability theory and affect theory as complementary analytical frameworks.

Critical disability theory challenges traditional ways of thinking about disability, which treat it as an individual shortcoming to be "fixed." Instead, it builds on the social model of disability, distinguishing between *impairment*—bodily or functional differences—and *disability*, which emerges from the social, material, and political conditions that surround us. Disability, from this perspective, manifests as failure to live up to normative expectations of behavior, abilities, and performance. This understanding highlights how systemic and structural factors shape exclusion and calls for educational practices that embrace learner diversity as foundational. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not about individual accommodation but about reconfiguring schools to foster collective participation and belonging.

Affect theory complements this by exploring emotions as productive forces that shape inclusive and exclusionary practices. Emotions don't just exist within individuals—they circulate in society, attaching to certain ideas, practices, and figures. This dissertation investigates how these emotional currents co-construct orientations toward inclusive education, shaping whether it is seen as attainable, desirable, or out of reach.

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative approaches, including ethnographic classroom observations and interviews with teachers, school leaders, municipal coordinators, and students. The empirical focus of the observations is on primary school classrooms, providing a rich context for understanding how inclusion unfolds in practice. Teachers, as key actors in implementing inclusion, are central to the analysis, providing insights into how systemic norms translate into everyday school practices.

A methodological contribution of the dissertation is its critical reflection on how research methodologies themselves can either challenge or reproduce deficit-based narratives. By foregrounding issues such as norm visibility, structural dynamics, and representational risks, the study contributes to the broader methodological conversation on how ethnographic research can support a more nuanced understanding of inclusive education.

Key findings reveal how deficit-based approaches are embedded in educational practices, framing students' challenges as individualized issues rather than as consequences of systemic and structural dynamics. For example, classroom activities often assume narrow norms for behavior and abilities, leaving students who do not conform to these expectations positioned as "problems." However, the dissertation also identifies moments of inclusive potential—situations where educators challenge established norms, collaborate on adaptive strategies, and enact practices that emphasize flexibility and shared responsibility. These moments highlight the possibility of moving beyond deficit-based logics to create more inclusive educational environments.

Another contribution is the foregrounding of emotions as central to how inclusion is constructed and enacted. With this perspective, the dissertation illuminates how emotions like frustration and resignation produce inclusive education, and the students associated with it, as impossible. As a consequence, educators may orient away from inclusion, viewing it as separate from their responsibilities. In contrast, moments of curiosity, satisfaction, and pride reveal the emotional complexity of inclusion and challenge its negative framing. The dissertation argues that these affective dynamics must be acknowledged and addressed for inclusion to become fully integrated into educators' work. Reframing inclusive education as an affective economy positions it as a dynamic,

emotionally charged process rather than a neutral policy, offering new perspectives on its challenges.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the conversation about inclusive education by re-emphasizing the need for systemic and cultural transformation. Through its structural, relational, and affective analysis, it contributes to a vision of education that sees students' diverse needs not as problems to be solved but as invitations to rethink and strengthen inclusion. By drawing on critical disability perspectives, the work demonstrates how questioning norms and expectations around ability can support the transformation of inclusive education into an ongoing, collective effort that benefits all students.

There are three articles included in this dissertation:

- Nilsson, I.A. and Moström, S. (in review) "Seeing Differently in Inclusive Education: Ethnographic Pathways and Reflexive Practices" *Ethnography and Education.*

- Nilsson, I.A. (in review) "In Search of a DisSchool: Deficit and Inclusion in Danish Schools". *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research.* Special issue on critical disability studies.

- Nilsson, I.A. (submitted) "Caught in a Bad Mood: The Affective Economy of Inclusive Education". *International Journal of Inclusive Education.*

DANSK RESUMÉ

Når vi taler om inklusion i dag, er samtalen ofte præget af skepsis og kritik. Det oprindelige løfte om at skabe mere inkluderende skoler, hvor alle børn kan føle sig hjemme, drukner ofte i en diskurs, der kredser om udfordringer og problemer. Målet med inkluderende uddannelse var ellers klart: at styrke tilhørsforholdet og reducere eksklusion for alle elever. Overgangen fra vision til praksis har dog vist sig at være udfordrende, hvilket understreger behovet for nye perspektiver, der ikke bare skubber til, men også gentænker, hvordan vi forstår og praktiserer inkluderende undervisning – og dermed lægger grunden for en fornyet indsats.

Denne afhandling søger at genoplive visionen om inklusion i folkeskolen som en strukturel og transformativ tilgang, der skaber rum for alle elevers deltagelse og læring. For at adressere disse udfordringer og gentænke inklusion trækker denne afhandling på kritisk handicapteori – *critical disability studies* – og affektteori som komplementære analyserammer. *Critical disability studies* bygger på den sociale handicapmodel og skelner mellem kropslige forhold, som betegnes som *impairment*, og *disability*, der defineres som et produkt af de sociale, materielle og politiske vilkår, vi lever i. *Disability* opstår således, når mennesker ikke passer ind i de normative forventninger til adfærd, funktion og præstation, som samfundet stiller. Denne forståelse udfordrer de traditionelle, medicinske forestillinger om *disability*, der reducerer det til et individuelt problem. Sådan en tilgang peger på behovet for systemiske forandringer, hvor forskelle mellem elever ikke blot accepteres, men bliver et grundlæggende orienteringspunkt. Inklusion forstås derfor som en dynamisk og kontinuerlig proces, der stræber efter at skabe skolefællesskaber, hvor alle elever kan deltage og høre til.

Affektteori komplementerer dette perspektiv ved at undersøge, hvordan følelser fungerer som produktive kræfter, der både muliggør og begrænser inkluderende og ekskluderende praksisser. Følelser er ikke kun noget, der eksisterer i individer – de cirkulerer i sociale fællesskaber, hvor de knytter sig til bestemte ideer, praksisser og figurer. I denne afhandling undersøges det, hvordan disse følelsesmæssige strømninger bidrager til at skabe bestemte orienteringer mod inklusion i folkeskolen. Samtidig udforskes det, hvordan følelser former, hvad der opfattes som muligt, ønskværdigt og værdifuldt i arbejdet med inklusion.

Metodologisk bygger studiet på kvalitative tilgange, herunder etnografiske klasseobservationsstudier samt interviews med lærere, skoleledere, kommunale koordinatorer og elever. Det empiriske fokus er folkeskolens indskoling, og lærerne, som er nøgleaktører i implementeringen af inklusion, indtager en central rolle i analysen. Deres perspektiver giver en værdifuld indsigt i, hvordan systemiske normer oversættes og forhandles i de daglige skolepraksisser.

Samtidig reflekterer afhandlingen kritisk over, hvordan forskningsmetoder selv kan udfordre eller fastholde deficit-orienterede forståelser. Afhandlingen bidrager metodologisk ved at pege på, hvordan metoder risikerer at reproducere ekskluderende logikker, hvis de ikke kritisk adresserer de strukturelle og relationelle dimensioner af inklusion. Ved at fremhæve normer, strukturelle dynamikker og repræsentationsrisici tilbyder afhandlingen perspektiver på, hvordan etnografisk forskning kan understøtte en mere nuanceret forståelse af inkluderende uddannelse.

Andre centrale resultater viser, hvordan mangelbaserede tilgange udfolder sig i uddannelsespraksisser ved at definere elevers udfordringer som individuelle mangler fremfor som produkter af de strukturer, der former klasseaktiviteterne. Samtidig identificerer afhandlingen øjeblikke med inkluderende potentiale – situationer, hvor undervisere udfordrer eksisterende normer, udvikler samarbejdsorienterede strategier og implementerer praksisser, der understøtter tilpasningsevne og delt ansvar.

Udover de strukturelle og normdrevne udfordringer ved inklusion viser afhandlingen også, hvordan følelser spiller en central rolle i konstruktionen af inklusion. Med dette perspektiv belyser afhandlingen, hvordan følelser som frustration og resignation bidrager til forestillinger om inklusion – og de elever, der forbindes med dette arbejde – som umulige. Samtidig kaster øjeblikke præget af nysgerrighed, tilfredshed og stolthed lys over inklusionens følelsesmæssige kompleksitet og udfordrer de dominerende, negative forståelser af den. Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at disse affektive dynamikker må anerkendes og adresseres, hvis inklusion skal integreres fuldt ud i lærernes arbejde. Ved at gentænke inkluderende uddannelse som en affektiv økonomi positioneres det som en dynamisk og følelsesladet proces fremfor en neutral politik og åbner dermed for nye perspektiver på dets udfordringer og muligheder.

Afslutningsvis bidrager denne afhandling til samtalen om inklusion i folkeskolen ved at understrege behovet for systemisk og kulturel transformation. Den argumenterer for en grundlæggende gentænkning af, hvordan skoler organiserer sig for at imødekomme forskelligheder. Gennem sin strukturelle, relationelle og affektive analyse tilbyder afhandlingen en vision for uddannelse, der ikke ser elevers forskellige behov som problemer, der skal løses, men som en mulighed for at gentænke og styrke inklusion. Ved at trække på kritiske handicap-perspektiver viser den, hvordan spørgsmål til normer og forventninger omkring evner kan åbne op for en transformation af inkluderende uddannelse til en kontinuerlig, kollektiv indsats, der gavner alle elever. Sammen bidrager disse indsigter til en gentænkning af inklusion som både en teoretisk, metodologisk og praktisk udfordring, der kræver systemiske og relationelle løsninger.

Afhandlingen inkluderer tre artikler:

- Nilsson, I.A., and Moström, S. (in review) "Seeing Differently in Inclusive Education: Ethnographic Pathways and Reflexive Practices" *Ethnography and Education.*

- Nilsson, I.A. (in review) "In Search of a DisSchool: Deficit and Inclusion in Danish Schools". *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research:* special issue on critical disability studies.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

> He has social competencies, like during breaks or physical education, for example, but also sometimes in the classroom; in some ways his skills put him ahead of the others. So, it's like, there are many situations where he performs well. Then there's just this damn school framework where he is supposed to sit down and do things, and that doesn't work. But then again, that's not a small thing…

The teacher quoted above is talking about a boy who was failing to meet expectations regarding classroom behavior. During my observations, I had watched him increasingly draw negative attention from the teachers. Some days, their entire energy seemed consumed by the effort to keep him physically in the room–and from disturbing the other students. Getting him to engage with academic tasks? That often felt like a distant goal. And yet, I did not once hear the teachers question whether he belonged in the mainstream class. When I asked about him, the teacher answered with the quote above, reflecting on his strengths and how they help him fit into the class community. As she phrases it, it is just the "damn school framework" that is causing problems–the expectations of mainstream schooling of sitting down and doing things. As she spoke, she realized the irony of using the word "just." These expectations are, after all, a fundamental part of our idea of schooling. Her comment stayed with me, capturing the contradiction teachers face when navigating inclusion: balancing a student's strengths and sense of belonging against the sometimes rigid structures and expectations of the classroom.

Since 2011, when Denmark established inclusion as the guiding policy principle for students considered to have "special educational needs," the proportion of students in special schools and classes has increased. Meanwhile, the percentage of students receiving support in mainstream settings has remained relatively unchanged (Andreasen, Rangvid, and Lindeberg 2022). This trend is not unique to Denmark. Globally, the prevalence of "special educational needs" continues to grow, alongside a dominant focus on diagnostic labels as explanations for student diversity (Allan and Harwood 2022; Engsig and Johnstone 2015; Langager 2014; Larsen et al. 2019). At the same time, the term "special educational needs" lacks a consistent definition with regard to both research and practice, and

its interpretation varies widely in different countries (Keles et al. 2022). As stated by Norwich and Eaton (2015), "special educational needs" do not have a direct relationship to medical diagnoses; they arise as child and school context meet. Not all children with the same diagnostic label will have the same educational needs. In fact, some students with diagnostic labels may not require what we consider "special" support at all, while others without such labels might. In Denmark, a recent study reflected this complexity.[1] Teachers estimated that, on average, 23.4% of students in mainstream schools need "additional" support, ranging from help with organization and focus to interventions for social or emotional challenges (Tegtmejer, Schoop, Corydon, and Andreasen 2024). Yet, the proportion of students with diagnostic labels is significantly lower—around 12.3% by 9th grade. This discrepancy highlights how concepts like "special needs" are shaped by historically and culturally conditioned normative expectations within educational systems, rather than strictly tied to medical labels. These norms influence who receives support, who is overlooked, and what kind of support is offered. The educational system itself thus produces and upholds normative standards for what counts as "normal."

It is these same expectations that are expressed in the quote at the start of this chapter. The student's struggles can be traced to the normative expectations of the mainstream classroom—expectations that privilege certain ways of being, behaving, and learning. Such expectations underscore the challenges of realizing inclusive education in practice, as basic, taken for granted principles of organizing a school day can work against their stated goals. Addressing this calls for a broader understanding of inclusion, namely, one that goes beyond diagnostic frameworks to encompass the full spectrum of student diversity as a natural part of school life. It also reinforces the need to critically interrogate the norms and values underpinning inclusion policies and practices. Raising such questions can help reveal the mechanisms of exclusion rooted in culturally specific constructions of ability and normality.

In this dissertation, I investigate how the normative expectations of schooling are produced, negotiated, and enacted within the framework of inclusive education in Danish schools. Drawing on critical disability

1 Teachers in 3rd, 6th, and 9th grade were asked to rate the educational support needs of their students. 3rd grade students were estimated to have the highest need of "additional" support at 25%, while 9th grade students were rated at 20.7%.

studies (Garland-Thomson 2002; 2005; 2019; Goodley 2014; Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2015; Minich 2016) and affect theory (Ahmed 2006; 2014a; 2014b) as analytical frameworks, I examine inclusive education, a concept marked by persistent conflict and ambivalence—one that continues to be perceived as lacking meaningful impact in practice.

Critical disability studies provides the foundation for this work by offering the means to challenge deficit-based understandings of disability and to interrogate the societal norms and structures that produce exclusion. As a framework, it emphasizes the sociomaterial and political processes through which disability is constructed, situating inclusion as a counter-hegemonic practice that disrupts ableist norms. Disability, as used here, refers to the sociomaterial processes that construct and categorize bodies and minds in relation to normative expectations, while ableism denotes the privileging of the able-bodied and able-minded in all facets of our society. These terms are central to the dissertation and will be critically employed throughout, forming the foundation of its theoretical and analytical approach. Ahmed's theory of affect complements this by drawing attention to the emotional dimensions of inclusion. Drawing on Ahmed's (2014b) concept of affective economies, I explore how emotions circulate and "stick" to certain figures and practices, shaping orientations toward inclusion. Together, these two theoretical frameworks enable a multi-dimensional analysis of inclusive education, highlighting how disability challenges normative boundaries while also generating new possibilities for transformation in schools.

This theoretical lens informs the qualitative research strategy employed in this study, which includes interviews with teachers, students and other school professionals as well as ethnographic observations of a primary school classroom. Teachers' work provides a critical lens for understanding how inclusion is navigated, challenged, and reproduced in practice. By foregrounding teachers—the primary enactors of norms and inclusive practices—I examine how systemic expectations are translated into everyday classroom interactions. For these reasons, although many perspectives are brought into the analysis, this dissertation places teachers at its core, exploring their role in shaping the normative frameworks of inclusive education in their daily work.

1.1. Inclusion and segregation in Danish schools: a structural overview

The Danish school system is decentralized, with municipalities being responsible for organizing compulsory education for children aged 6 to 16, covering kindergarten (0th grade) through 9th grade, with an optional 10th grade. Compulsory schooling is bifurcated into two main branches: mainstream schools (public and private) and special schools.

Special education in Denmark operates under the Executive Order on Special Education and Other Special Pedagogical Support within the Folkeskole framework (Bekendtgørelse om folkeskolens specialundervisning og anden specialpædagogisk bistand 2014). This legal framework defines special education as support for students with "significant learning, physical, or psychological challenges." Support can include tailored instructional materials, pedagogical guidance for teachers and parents, and personal assistance. Importantly, the law emphasizes that special support should primarily be offered within mainstream classrooms, reserving segregated settings, such as special classes or schools, for students whose needs exceed 9 hours of weekly specialized support (approximately 12 lessons). Placement decisions are informed by pedagogical-psychological assessments conducted collaboratively by municipal Educational-Psychological Advisory Services (PPR), parents, and school professionals.

As of the 2022/2023 school year, approximately 5.1% of Danish students were educated in segregated settings, a proportion that has increased since 2015 (Tegtmejer et al. 2024). While national policy does not formally require a medical diagnosis to access special education services, diagnoses are often perceived by parents and professionals as a means to secure resources. The tension between individualized diagnoses and inclusive intentions highlights a recurring challenge in Danish education: balancing the promise of inclusive practices with the pressures of limited resources and entrenched institutional norms. Understanding these dynamics is essential for situating this dissertation's exploration of inclusive education within the specificities of the Danish educational landscape.

1.2. Inclusive education: origins, tensions, and challenges

Making its grand arrival on the global educational policy stage with the World Conference on Special Needs in Salamanca 1994, inclusive education is a large and active field of research, policy, and practice (Dyson 1999; Magnússon 2019). Despite being such a high-profile concept, however, inclusive education remains difficult to pin down both theoretically and practically (Keles et al. 2022). Graham and Slee (2008) note that the original intent of inclusive education was to challenge the status quo of special education—a system rooted in segregated environments and a deficit-based understanding of disability. By the late 20th century, research increasingly highlighted the limitations of special education. Studies showed that segregated students often made less academic progress, despite the costly interventions provided (Dyson 1999; Qvortrup and Qvortrup 2018). Critics like Sally Tomlinson argued that labelling children as having "special needs" served as a mechanism for social differentiation, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. Special education, she contended, not only segregates children deemed problematic, but also legitimates their further oppression by lowering educational attainment and thereby limiting social mobility (Tomlinson 2012; 2017). This exclusion has historically fallen hardest on children having racial minority backgrounds, those affected by poverty, and working-class children (Tomlinson 2012; Berhanu 2016). In this regard, special education often reproduces social inequalities, further marginalizing those it claims to help (Dyson 1999).

As disability studies developed in the latter half of the 20th century, researchers and activists from this field also heavily criticized special educational systems. A major project for disability studies in the 20th century was to move the understanding of disability away from being a deficiency, trauma, and tragedy placed in the psychological, biological, and personal realm, and situate it instead in social, cultural, and political arenas (Garland-Thomson 2005; Shakespeare 2014). Disability scholars argued that the *medical model of disability*, dominant in special education, framed disability as deficiencies inherent to the individual. The medical model approach emphasized compensatory measures to normalize disabled students, reinforcing an individualized perspective (Batstra, van Roy and Thoutenhoofd 2021; Goodley 2013). By contrast, *the social model of disability*—rooted in the disability movement— reframed disability as a

product of societal barriers rather than individual impairments. The social model thus distinguishes between *disability* as a socially produced marking of difference and *impairment* as a reference to bodily dispositions – for example differences in limbs or visual impairments.

The relational and contextual perspectives of the social model underpinned the Salamanca statement, which positioned inclusive education as a way to address these societal barriers (Goodley 2013; Shakespeare 2014). The statement explicitly argues that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO 1994, Article 2). The field of educational inclusion that arose in the processes surrounding the Salamanca statement found a point of departure in students with so-called special needs and discussions about their place in school systems globally. However, since then, there has been a move towards redefining inclusive education as a vision of belonging and anti-discrimination concerning *all children*, regardless of background and characteristics (Bešić 2020; UNESCO 2020). In the dissertation, I follow this development and view inclusion as a process that should be aimed at all children in all school forms.

Despite the aspirations articulated in the Salamanca statement and reaffirmed in subsequent international conferences (e.g. UNESCO 2020), schools continue to face challenges in terms of translating the vision of inclusion into practice. Efforts to build inclusive school communities must navigate competing agendas, including academic achievement, student well-being, and financial constraints. These overlapping priorities complicate both the perception and implementation of inclusive strategies, contributing to its characterization as a complex and contested field of research and practice (Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Ydesen et al. 2022).

Inclusive education has furthermore faced substantial criticism, both for its perceived lack of impact and for the changes it has instigated (Bagger and Lillivist 2021; Slee 2018). Some argue that inclusive education has gone too far, while others contend that it has not yet been meaningfully attempted (Allan 2023). Proponents of the latter perspective emphasize that inclusive education represents a fundamental departure from special education, rather than a revised version. From this standpoint, the

challenges to inclusive education in practice arise from its incomplete implementation. Instead of being allowed to redefine how schools address difference, inclusion has been layered onto existing special education structures, contributing to confusion among both practitioners and researchers.

In research, these issues become manifest in studies that, despite aiming to examine inclusion, continue to highlight the placement of individual students or specific categories of learners (Haug 2010; Slee, Corcoran and Best 2019). Messiou (2017) analyzed research published in the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* over the preceding 11 years and found that 82% of the articles focused on specific groups of children (e.g. with "special educational needs") or categories (e.g. ADHD), while studies focusing on all children made up only 8% of the contributions. These individualized approaches risk reinforcing the deficit-based logics that inclusive education seeks to dismantle, highlighting the need for a more systemic and structural reimagining of inclusion in both policy and practice.

1.3. Approaching inclusive education with critical disability and affect

Critical disability is a relatively new theoretical formation, but draws on influences from poststructuralism, new materialism and of course disability studies as it turns our gaze towards the sociocultural production of ability and disability and its consequences. Building from the divide of disability and impairment that came with the social model, it is a norm critical perspective influenced by, and in constant dialogue with feminist, critical race, and queer theories (Goodley 2013). Scholars in critical disability studies advance disability perspectives by understanding disability as a provocation to conceptions of ableist normality (Garland-Thompson 2002; Goodley 2013). It is through the encounter with disability that ideas about its counterpart, ability, are crystallized and made visible.

Critical disability theorist Dan Goodley (2013, 2018) conceptualizes his disability approach as a dis/ability complex. The complex is a collection of terminology drawing on the friction between "dis" and "ability". The addition of a "dis" has the potential, Goodley (2013) argues, to disrupt the status quo and thereby refashion, trouble, and reshape conventions. The slash in dis/ability comes to represent how ableist norms work to separate

individual human qualities into dichotomous groupings of acceptable and non-acceptable, normal and deviant. Thinking through the slash thus becomes a way of anchoring the co-dependency and co-constitutive qualities of the two terms, while also reminding us that far from being a static condition, dis/ability is always a process of negotiation.

In keeping with these considerations, I consider disability not as an essentialist individual quality but as the result of the way bodily variations are valued in our historically situated social order. The contingency of disability and ability, normality and deviance, is central to this understanding, as is the characterization of disability as emergent. As stated by Tobin Siebers (2001), almost all of us both start our lives and end them in disabled positions. Disability is therefore not a regrettable, fixable state of being but is always negotiated and reconstituted in different temporal and spatial arrangements. In this way, disability is a socially produced marking of difference. In the words of feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002, 20):

> The disabled body is a body whose variations or transformations have rendered it out of sync with its environment, both the physical and attitudinal environment. The body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations.

All children are therefore at risk of being disabled by ableist expectations in school in different ways and at different moments, with some being at higher risk of perpetual marginalization and exclusion (Felder 2022).

While critical disability informs the overarching aims, methods, and thinking in this dissertation, I have chosen to analytically complement this perspective with Ahmed's (2014b) theory of affect. Affect theory provides a lens to illuminate the emotional dynamics that co-construct inclusive education as an educational agenda today. This perspective helps me move beyond viewing inclusion as a fixed set of attitudes or practices, to instead frame it as a dynamic and affectively charged process that both shapes and is shaped by the emotions circulating within educational spaces. Similarly to critical disability studies, affect theory enables an exploration of how inclusion operates not only as a policy ideal but also as an embodied, relational phenomenon. Concepts like affective economy, stickiness, and affective figures and orientations, which are addressed in chapter 3,

support my examination of the ways in which emotions produce and disrupt normative expectations in terms of inclusive educational practices.

1.3.1. A note on language use

Within the broader discussions around language in disability studies, different terminologies reflect varying theoretical orientations. For instance, some researchers adopt "people-first language", using terms like "people with disabilities" to emphasize the humanity of disabled individuals (Titchkosky 2001). However, as Tanya Titchkosky argues, the phrase "people with disabilities" stems from a medical model perspective, positioning disability as a personal attribute rather than as a product of social marginalization. The implications of the social model of disability are that people *have* impairments, while disability is a situated phenomenon arising from the interaction with a disabling society. "People with impairments" and "disabled people" would therefore more accurately capture these dynamics.

In this dissertation, I will follow the language conventions of the critical disability scholars I draw upon, using the terms "dis/ability" and "dis/abled" or "non-dis/abled" to signal a commitment to exploring the social processes that construct and reinforce dis/ability in Danish schools. The term "dis/abled" thus reflects the subject position resulting from contextual oppression rather than an individual characteristic. This approach aligns with my critique of the deficit logics embedded in the medical model of dis/ability, which continue to shape school practices. Consequently, the potential impairments of students in my empirical material do not occupy a central role here; instead, the focus is on the systemic and relational processes that produce dis/ability while positioning difference as deficiencies. The dynamic interplay of disability, ability, and impairment will be addressed in depth in chapter 3.

1.4. Disrupting norms: a dis/ability-informed view of inclusion

Marginalization in schooling and explorations of the construction of "the normal student" have received much attention in a Danish context (e.g. Kirkebæk 2010; Hamre 2012; Langager 2014), especially in terms of gender and ethnicity (Filikci and Li 2022; Gilliam 2022; Kofoed 2004; Khawaja and Lagermann 2023; Staunæs 2004; Yang 2021). Some works have critically examined normality and "special needs" in Danish schools

in ways that could be conceptualized as critical dis/ability approaches, without explicitly working in this discipline (e.g. Hamre 2012; Røn-Larsen 2011). Moreover, educational inclusion in a Danish context has strong ties to the "well-being" discourse, which similarly to inclusive education has seen large societal debates in recent years. These debates about student well-being rub up against the field of inclusion with overlapping relationships to debates about performance culture and the increasingly pervasive culture of diagnosis (Brinkmann 2016; Justenborg 2023). Although often working with intersectional approaches, few works have foregrounded dis/ability as a socially produced category in these processes (Hamre 2016).

Key contributions of this dissertation are therefore made possible by its theoretical approach to inclusive education, grounded in a critical dis/ability perspective. This framework is particularly well-suited to disrupting the notion of the "normal" (able) student, challenging normative expectations in schooling, and destabilizing traditional teaching practices (Goodley 2014). Building on Avril Minich's (2016) argument that dis/ability can function not only as a subject of study but also as a mode of analysis, this dissertation positions dis/ability as an analytical lens that shapes the entire research process—from conceptualization to interpretation. Guided by the principles of critical dis/ability studies, this approach informs not only the analysis but also the production of empirical materials. For example, critical dis/ability studies has shaped my ethnographic focus on how failures to meet normative expectations in the classroom can provoke shifts in practice, highlighting both tensions and possibilities for inclusive education. In this regard, I am inspired by Srikala Naraian's (2021, 303) call to "understand the phenomenon of inclusion, in all its flawed incarnations, as "becoming, as what is ending and what is about to be." Following this, Naraian (2021) suggests an approach involving affirmative critique. Such an approach focuses on unveiling potential that can act as a disturbance, enabling the researcher to interrupt and transcend established understandings in their research (Staunæs 2016; Zembylas 2022). Affirmative critique thus enables the collision of normality and difference to challenge ableist structures and foster new paths forward, broadening what is considered possible within educational systems. In my analysis of the materials that I have produced during this project, I therefore actively look for potential ways of "doing differently," or in other words, for practices that fully consider what the provocation

of dis/ability invites them to see, and actions based on those new realizations.

Situated within the rich Danish research tradition of exploring difference and marginalized positions in schooling and building on the definition of dis/ability proposed by Garland-Thomson (2002) above, in this dissertation I adopt a broad definition of inclusive education. Inclusion is not something that can be achieved once and for all; rather it is a continuous effort to create a cohesive community, with diversity as its ontological point of departure (Haug 2017; Nilholm 2021). As Francizka Felder (2022, 217) argues, inclusion is not a tick-the-box objective, but a social phenomenon that has to be "continuously regenerated in a processual way." I base my understanding on the social model of dis/ability and its imagining within critical dis/ability studies. This means that inclusive education concerns structural efforts of creating differentiated modes of participation, breaking down exclusionary barriers for all students. In its relentless focus on contextual explanations of dis/ability, it stands in clear contrast to individual and deficiency-oriented perspectives of traditional special education. Inclusive education thus becomes the answer to the question posed by dis/ability as it is produced in schools.

1.5. Research focus and questions

In a recent Danish research review, special and inclusive education researcher Lotte Hedegaard-Sørensen (2021) divides the field into two main strains–sociological and didactic inclusion research. In the former, the focus is often on issues of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. Inclusive education is positioned as a normative ideal for schools and society. Such research, Hedegaard-Sørensen argues, is mainly ideological and has little connection to actual classroom practices. The other strain of research is related to practice and what works, but does not take the structural, contextual factors surrounding the classroom into account. Despite its prescriptive relationship to practice, it is therefore seldom translatable for teachers and other staff working with inclusive development in schools. In this dissertation, my ambition is to land somewhere in between these two strains of research. The work presented here is deeply anchored in the practical realities of school administrators and teachers as well as in the daily goings on of students in a primary school classroom. As is described in depth in chapter 4 and 5, I have been

devoted to a continuous reflexivity regarding the representations of practice included in the dissertation. I also have great respect for the work being done in Danish schools to improve the schooling experience for all children. It is complex work filled with hard decisions, dilemmas, and setbacks. One of the contributions of this dissertation is that the voices of those who *do* inclusive education every day are present throughout. However, there are no prescriptions for inclusive practice at the end of this dissertation, nor do I attempt to portray "what works" or an account of "best practices." Positioning my other leg in more sociological and theoretical approaches to inclusive education research, I aim to bring forth destabilizing perspectives that can serve to push inclusive education thinking and practice in new directions. By foregrounding difference as potential, the critical dis/ability studies framework that underpins the dissertation has the capacity to contribute to constructive ways of reimagining practice in a way that takes all children into account. The joining of critical dis/ability studies and Sara Ahmed's (2014b) theory of affect builds on this reimagining and aspires to delineate how inclusive education can avoid being stuck in problematizing discourse and instead be reanimated and affectively restoried. The dissertation thus provides new outlooks on the translation of inclusive education into practice, nuancing understandings and illuminating other paths forward. By employing different analytical lenses, the dissertation provides a multi-dimensional exploration of inclusive education, integrating methodological reflexivity, critical dis/ability perspectives, and affect theory to challenge and reimagine ableist normativity in Danish schools. This work has been guided by the following questions:

How can an approach rooted in dis/ability and affect provide both a critical lens on the ableist normative structures of schooling and a constructive imagination for inclusive education in Danish schools?

- How can ethnographic methods, informed by critical dis/ability studies, challenge deficiency-oriented and individualized narratives in the study of inclusive education?

- What structural and normative frameworks shape the interplay between deficit-based and inclusive approaches in schools, and how are these frameworks upheld or contested?

- What does the affective landscape of inclusive education look like, and what orientations for action do these affects produce?

By addressing these questions, the dissertation situates itself at the intersection of theory and practice, bridging the gap between structural critiques and the lived realities of inclusive education. By troubling dominant narratives and exploring alternative orientations toward inclusion, the dissertation invites educators, researchers, and policymakers to rethink what inclusion means and how it might be realized.

1.5.1. Reader's guide: overview of chapters and articles

Chapter 1: Introduction The introduction establishes the framework for the dissertation, focusing on the tensions between inclusion as an ideal and its practical enactment in Danish schools. It outlines the study's theoretical grounding in critical dis/ability studies and affect theory. The chapter contextualizes inclusive education within Danish policy, highlighting systemic challenges that shape schooling. Finally, it introduces the research questions and sets the stage for a multi-dimensional exploration of inclusion through methodological reflexivity, critical theory, and empirical insights.

Chapter 2: The inclusive education landscape: a context for research The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of key debates in inclusive education, including its contested definitions, the influence of accountability and economic agendas, and emerging organizational models such as middle forms. The chapter also highlights the tension between theoretical ideals and practical implementation; it asks how inclusive education policies intersect with neoliberal performance discourses in the Danish context. These reflections establish the conceptual and contextual backdrop for the dissertation's exploration of inclusive education.

Chapter 3: Framing The theory chapter establishes the dissertation's conceptual foundation by situating it within critical

dis/ability and affect: a theoretical lens on inclusive education

dis/ability studies and by integrating affect theory. It explores how dis/ability is socially, culturally, and materially constructed, emphasizing the relational nature of these concepts and their embeddedness in power dynamics. It introduces the crip theory strain of critical dis/ability studies and builds a bridge to Ahmed's theoretical apparatus. Together, these perspectives enable a multi-dimensional analysis of inclusive education, focusing on the tensions between deficit-based and inclusion-oriented logics in Danish schools.

Chapter 4: Reflexivity in action: exploring inclusion with a critical dis/ability lens

The methodology chapter is framed as a reflexive discussion on the qualitative approach of the dissertation, which combines ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to explore inclusive education as a co-constructed and situated phenomenon. It introduces intermittent ethnography as a flexible method for capturing both in-depth moments and broader processes within a Danish primary school. Reflexivity and positionality are central themes, as I critically navigate relationships, ethical considerations, and the impact of their role on the field.

Chapter 5: A quest to see differently

Chapter 5 introduces the first article, which is a methodological exploration of the challenges inherent in ethnographic research on inclusive education. It examines how ethnographic approaches can unintentionally reproduce dominant narratives in the field. By engaging in a collaborative process of mutual critique and reflection, my coauthor and I contribute to the broader discourse on how to explore inclusive education ethnographically. We argue for increased methodological discussions that can enable researchers to resist reductionism and highlight the multifaceted nature of inclusion as it unfolds in practice.

Chapter 6: Beyond:

The chapter contains the second article of the dissertation as well as an analytical introduction and

deficits: rethinking inclusive education

epilogue. The article investigates how deficit-based and inclusive understandings of dis/ability are (re)produced and (re)negotiated in Danish schools. Using Goodley and Runswick-Cole's concept of "DisSchool," the article highlights how dis/ability disrupts ableist norms and can provoke structural change, while also revealing how entrenched deficit-based approaches can limit inclusive efforts. The epilogue extends the discussion by using crip-theory to frame inclusion as a practice that accommodates diverse ways of being, participating and learning.

Chapter 7: Sticky emotions: affect, inclusion, and the "inclusion-child"

This article examines the affective economy of inclusive education, focusing on how emotions circulate and shape enactment of inclusion in Danish schools. Using Ahmed's theory of affect and leaning on the discursive figure of the "inclusion-child", it explores how emotions stick to this figure, influencing orientations toward inclusion. The analysis highlights how these emotional dynamics reinforce deficit-based logics, externalizing systemic challenges onto the "inclusion-child" and framing inclusion as an individualized problem. The epilogue expands on the inclusion-child as a complex, affective figure that embodies systemic tensions while also inviting new ways of understanding and enacting inclusion in schools.

Chapter 8: Concluding discussion

The concluding discussion synthesizes the key findings of the dissertation, emphasizing the persistence of deficit-based logics and individualized perspectives, and their reinforcement by affective dynamics as central challenges to inclusive education. It highlights the importance of addressing these issues through structural, relational, and affective lenses, advocating inclusive education as a dynamic, systemic process rather than an individualized intervention.

Chapter 2. The inclusive education landscape: a context for research

> Like if you're not included in the social community, then you're not included at all, that's not inclusion. That's exclusion. And exclusion also equals inclusion, because you can't have some people included always. Sometimes you have to exclude some people to include them, you know.

Where does one start the task of providing an overview of inclusive education research? As exemplified in the above quote from a teacher, inclusive education is not a concept that is easily pinpointed, especially because in practice it unfolds in a myriad of contexts and situations. In a somewhat messy explanation, the teacher underscores the importance of understanding the complexities behind the ambition of inclusivity for all students. Inclusive education has become a large and dynamic field that keeps expanding with many new reports, guidelines, books, and papers being published each year (or, according to my gut feeling, every hour). Providing an overview is indeed a daunting task, and there are many ways of approaching it. Grant and Booth (2009) have for example listed 14 different styles of reviews in their review of reviews. The "review" you will read here, to quote Lather (1999, 3), is "situated, partial and perspectival." It does not lay claim to follow the rules of a specific type. This chapter instead contains a presentation of selected literature representing research on inclusive education, serving the purpose of providing background that supports, contextualizes, and brings nuance to the arguments of the dissertation. In this way, it is more of a review *for* or in support of research, than a review *of* research (Maxwell 2006). The chapter will start off with a short presentation of some recent systematic review findings. Thereafter, the text is built around three main themes: the definitional debates, the normative quest of inclusive education, and the economic rationales of its Danish implementation. A short, final section deals with the new trend of middle form organization.

2.1. Systematic snapshots

The inclusive education research community has produced a wealth of systematic reviews in the last decade. These papers, although diverse in their aims, can provide some insight into current trends in the field. In this section, I will highlight key takeaways from a couple of recent systematic reviews to provide a snapshot of the inclusive education research landscape before transitioning to a more narrative description of research relating to my own work. The reviews presented are systematic, recent, and focus on themes relevant to this dissertation.

Amor et al. (2019) systematically reviewed trends and themes in peer-reviewed inclusive education research from 2002-2016. They found that attitudinal, descriptive, and theoretical articles were most common in both the English and Spanish literature. "Attitudinal" refers to articles concerning the attitudes of teachers, students or parents towards inclusion, while descriptive studies are studies that describe various aspects of the implementation of inclusive education policy (Amor et al. 2019). 5% of the studies they reviewed were reports on the efficacy of specific interventions, while 2% of the articles were reviews and an additional 2% were coded as "non-inclusive" because they focused on students labelled with "special educational needs" in segregated settings and thus did not address inclusive education according to the authors definitions.[2] It is noteworthy that even though they discuss inclusive education as a term that has come to encompass all students, and seem to agree with this definition, their search terms reflect a focus on "students with disabilities" and "special needs." They furthermore excluded articles that addressed "only students without disabilities" (Amor et al. 2019, 1281).

Somewhat mirroring the findings of Amor et al. (2019), Van Mieghem, Verschueren, Petry & Struyf (2020) conducted a meta-review of inclusive education research, identifying five major themes currently addressed in the field. They were: attitudes toward inclusive education, teachers' professional development, practices enhancing inclusive education, student participation and, finally, reflections on research on inclusive education. The main takeaway for the authors of this review was the need

[2] This would, according to the authors, minimally require a focus on students labelled with "special needs" in mainstream environments.

for professional teacher development to focus on specific, "evidence-informed" inclusive education practices that can create successful teacher experiences, which they argue is crucial for successful inclusive education implementation.

In terms of attitudinal research, Wray, Sharma and Subban (2022) conducted a review of quantitative studies investigating teachers' self-efficacy to teach in inclusive education. They found five different factors that can influence teachers' self-efficacy in the area, namely: demographic factors, teacher internal attributes, teacher education and training, experience interacting with people with disabilities, and school climate. Demographic factors were factors like gender, age, geographical location, and experience. Teachers in systems where inclusive education had been an expectation for a longer period of time reported higher self-efficacy as did teachers with more extensive knowledge of legislation relating to inclusive policies. Primary school teachers also reported higher efficacy than other groups. Both gender and teacher experience provided ambivalent results in terms of effect on efficacy, where female teachers where sometimes more efficacious and in other studies not, and newer teachers were found to be more efficacious in some contexts whereas in others, more experienced teachers were more confident. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education were another important factor under the internal attributes rubric, and the review confirms an association between positive attitudes toward inclusive education and a higher self-efficacy. However, the direction of this relationship was not clear from the literature. Not surprisingly, most of the reviewed studies drew links between teacher education and teacher self-efficacy, which solidifies the importance of relevant training for teaching in inclusive schools. Furthermore, the more experience a teacher had with people with impairments, either in their personal life or from previous professional experience, the higher their self-efficacy in terms of including students labelled with "special educational needs" in their classrooms.

In terms of methodology, Keles et al. (2022) offered a systematic review of empirical research titled: "Inclusion of students with special education needs in the Nordic countries". They found that 59% of their reviewed material was based on qualitative research, of which 5% were ethnographic studies. In terms of the operationalized understanding of inclusion in these studies, they found that many of them were based on a deficit approach to dis/ability. The authors identified nine different

conceptualizations of inclusive education, with *physical placement* and *community and social participation* being the most common. They concluded with a call for more quantitative studies that evaluate and explore effects of specific interventions, which is something that they perceive as missing and necessary.

Finally, stretching the definition of "recent" somewhat, Göransson and Nilholm (2014), provided a much-cited systematic review on how inclusive education is defined in peer-reviewed journal articles about the topic. Their conceptual analysis identified four key understandings of inclusive education in research: a) as placement of dis/abled students in general classrooms, b) as meeting the social and/or academic needs of dis/abled students, c) as meeting the social and/or academic needs of all students, and d) inclusive education as community-building in the classroom. Their classifications thus contribute to an image of the field as being diverse in its conceptualization of inclusive education, making cross-study comparisons and syntheses difficult. The main takeaway from their study was therefore a call for future research in the field to provide explicit operationalizations of inclusive education in their research output as a way of making it more possible to build on experiences and findings across contexts.

The above-mentioned reviews underscore the diversity of approaches and challenges in researching inclusive education, with a recurring theme being the need for more precise definitions and evaluations of specific practices. One of the chapters in this dissertation makes use of affect theory to explore inclusive education as an affective economy (Ahmed 2014b). Such perspectives are not common in inclusive education research, which makes the prevalence of the somewhat related focus on attitudes in inclusive education research noteworthy. Slee (2011) has argued that a wide focus on attitudes toward inclusion is deeply problematic as it positions some students as the objects of others' attitudes. While an affective approach, as used in this dissertation, is a discursive untangling of emotions that co-constitute inclusive education, attitudinal research is often quantitative and asks decontextualized questions that single dis/abled students out and questions their presence. The attitudes of students labelled with "special needs" are curiously missing from this research, which instead typically asks teachers, parents, and peers what they think about having diverse learners in the classroom (Van Mieghem et al. 2022). By objectifying certain groups of students this way, attitudinal

research therefore risks reproducing deficiency-based perspectives that still thrive in the inclusive education research field.

Similarly, the call for more effect studies that can lead teachers toward successful implementation, highlights Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) point that there are many different conceptions of what inclusive education is within the field. Approaching the concept as something that can be achieved and measured suggests a finite, dichotomous understanding, where a student is either included or not. It furthermore indicates that it is possible to transfer interventions from one setting to another, which leads toward the idea that problems are carried by the students rather than being produced in specific interactions and contexts. Such positions are contested in this dissertation and are more commonly seen in traditional special education research, as I will show below.

In the same vein, systematic reviews are research syntheses closely aligned with quantitative and evidence-based paradigms of medicine and natural sciences (MacLure 2005). Their emphasis on the need for more systematic and quantitative studies should be read with this in mind. Including some of these reviews in my portrait of the inclusive education research landscape is a way for me to highlight the many different positions and contributions represented in this field. Given my constructivist approach, I construct the field I am studying, while it is simultaneously being constructed from many other positions. As was suggested initially, the specific contribution of a systematic review lies in the provision of a general overview of a field or of a subsection of a field. No such review can provide a complete image, but it is possible to sketch an outline of what currently goes on (Grant and Booth 2009). With such contours sketched out, I will now turn to a more narrative approach as I construct the background and context for this dissertation. Building on the argument put forward by Göransson and Nilholm (2014) about the crucial role of definitions in this field, in the next section I turn to some of the definitional debates around inclusive education.

2.2. What does "inclusive education" even mean?

A common trait of articles and books written about inclusive education is that they all address the ongoing struggle to define the concept. As many have previously stated (see for example Ainscow et al. 2019; Larsen et al. 2019; Nilholm and Göransson 2017) "inclusive education" has over the

years proved to be a multifaceted term. The many implications and connotations it carries are continuously debated. Most accounts of inclusive education start with the Salamanca statement, which represented the culmination of years of scholarly debates and activist pressure. Even though several international conferences and statements have been drafted since, Salamanca therefore still holds a special place in the history of inclusive education.

In the oft-cited article 2 of the statement, the following proclamations are made:

- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning

- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs

- education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs

- those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs

- regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO 1994, article 2).

Graham and Slee (2008) remark that the original intent of inclusive education was to radically challenge a status quo within special education discourse. A status quo, in this case, of segregated environments and an understanding of dis/ability that was deeply rooted in the language of individual deficiency. Salamanca challenged the idea of different educational needs leading to different educational provisions and made a

case for a welcoming local schools based on inclusive practices (Florian 2019). A dominant argument for proponents of inclusion leading up to Salamanca was that an inclusionary educational system is the only form of educational provision that counters stigmatizing and exclusionary processes while simultaneously allowing difference to become a natural part of schools and, by extension, society. Subsequently, one of the major aims of Salamanca was to draw attention to the many children labelled with "special needs" who had historically and continuously been marginalized and excluded from mainstream education (Florian 2019). Interestingly, the Salamanca statement emphasizes not only the equal rights of all children to quality education, but also the individuality of abilities, characteristics, and needs of all children, which has since been a tension characterizing the many interpretations of the concept (Magnússon 2019).

A definitional debate that arose post-Salamanca centered on the concepts of integration and inclusion (Alenkær 2008). Berhanu (2016, 51) points to some of the confusion deriving from the fact that the two terms and notions have been used interchangeably in some contexts, as inclusion was implemented on top of an already existing system of special educational provision rather than replacing it. Integration is, however, mainly understood as revolving around the physical placement of students – specifically the placement of students with special needs (Holloway and Hamre 2018). According to Felder (2022), the integration discourse was criticized in the late 90's and early 00's on the grounds that it maintained the importance of categorization of students so as to assess their eligibility for integration in mainstream education. Inclusive education proponents wished to challenge the link between "special needs" or dis/ability and inclusion. What complicates the debate is that placement is also important in rights-based arguments for inclusive education, as seen in the definition proposed by Thomazet (2009, 557), who writes that in an inclusive school:

> no pupil is refused because of the nature or the extent of his/her special needs. SEN pupils are not integrated in the inclusive school: they have their place by right, like all other pupils.

Some confusion could thus derive from the fact that placement has a place in inclusion discourses, the difference being that, contrary to integration, with inclusion placement is not the endpoint but a fundamental point of

departure (Haug 2017). As Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) have argued in their broad definition, inclusive education is about presence – but in combination with participation and achievement.

Critics of this rights-based approach to inclusive education have called out the inadequate descriptions of what is supposed to happen when all students are included in mainstream education (Dyson 1999). In this vein, Erevelles (2011:2157), writing from a critical dis/ability perspective, addresses inclusive education's "obsessive focus on space," suggesting that this focus diverts attention away from the underlying ideologies in the organization of schooling – ideologies that single out, categorize, and construct some students as deviant. Inclusive education, she argues, co-constructs ideas of the normal student by presupposing practices that distinguish those in need of inclusion (Erevelles 2011). This critique points to a lingering conflation of integration and inclusion in both theory and practice, suggesting that even though the headings have changed to "inclusive," ideas about the necessity of categorization persist. Along these lines, Florian (2019, 699) attacks the idea of mainstream education as "a good place." Too much effort goes into defining what inclusion is, and too little attention is awarded to what children are supposed to be included into, she argues. Instead, there is a need for more critical exploration of what goes on in the normative center of education, and the assumption that it presently has the capacity to include more students is not sufficiently discussed. Taking her point of departure in the terminology of "bell-curve thinking" as formulated by Fendler and Muzaffar (2008), she suggests that mainstream schooling is organized to cater to *most* students while *some* are always expected to be below average and fall outside of the scope. Instead of nominally accepting inclusion as the way forward, she argues for an increased interrogation of the mainstream's bell curve-tendencies and a move towards extending what is available to most students to incorporate *all* students.

According to Slee (2011), researchers who advocate inclusive education are aware of the persistence of understandings focusing on where students are. Even if definitions are not always made explicit in inclusive education research (Göransson and Nilholm 2014), defining inclusion as placement is for example common in quantitative research, which due to the nature of its approaches often conceptualizes inclusion as a finite event (Felder 2022). Physically being in the same building or even in the same classroom as other students does not, however, mean that the environment provides

opportunities to participate on similar terms or that the student becomes a valued part of a community of peers – socially or academically (Haug 2017).

In the previously mentioned review by Göransson and Nilholm (2014), the range of understandings of inclusive education is neatly exemplified. Briefly, the definitions they found in the literature on inclusive education were categorized as a) placement of dis/abled students in general classrooms, b) meeting the social and/or academic needs of dis/abled students, c) meeting the social and/or academic needs of all students, and d) inclusive education as community building in the classroom. The first of these definitions is entirely about place, while the second is limited to a consideration regarding some students rather than all. In the last two definitions there is a shift from addressing the specific placement and activities of a specific group of students toward a definition encompassing all students and the school structure as such. In recent years, the field has moved increasingly toward these later definitions embracing all students and the creation of inclusive classroom environments. This move is, for example, reflected in UNESCO's Cali commitment to Equity and Inclusion in Education, in which it is stated:

> We share the definition of inclusion as a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and *eliminating all forms of discrimination* in and through education. The term inclusion represents a commitment to making preschools, schools, and other education settings, places in which everyone is valued and belongs, and diversity is seen as enriching (UNESCO 2019, 1).

Rather than a finite placement-oriented definition, then, the recent literature suggests that inclusion should be viewed as a never-ending process that combats exclusion and aims at the academic and social participation and belonging of all students (Ainscow 2024; Felder 2022). In contrast to integration, inclusion incorporates an ambition to increase the capacity of educational systems to meet the needs of diverse learners of all kinds (Florian 2019; Keles et al. 2022; Reindal 2016; Slee 2011). It thereby represents a normative approach to the organization of a school for all students: a school embracing of diversity (Qvortrup and Qvortrup 2018). As has been suggested by Nilholm (2021), the definitional debates

have not yet been concluded, as a range of perspectives are still represented within the field. Importantly, as they transcend the discursive realm and emerge as pedagogical realities, these continuous negotiations of meaning also come to have great significance for the enactment and evaluation of inclusive education in practice (Florian 2019).

2.3. The normativity of inclusive education

As was argued in Chapter 1, this dissertation joins the conversation on inclusive education from the rights-based perspective inherent in a dis/ability studies tradition. The position I write from is therefore one that in general sees the division of students into mainstream and special education based on labelling practices as a reductive and simplistic approach to the management of human diversity. This is a normative stance that also can be found at the core of inclusive education theorizing. According to Corbett and Slee (2000, 136) inclusion is in fact a "distinctly political "in your face activity," as it is a process of changing the way difference is understood and handled in society. As an emerging paradigm, inclusive education research was often criticized from the already established special education field for its normative position, which was argued to lead to substandard scientific practices and speculative conclusions (Fuchs and Fuchs 1994; Kauffman and Hallahan 1994). In a retort to this criticism, Ellen Brantlinger (1997) wrote a review uncovering ideology in some of the most notable special education publications, underlining the point that such research is also guided by a fixed set of ideological assumptions. For example, she highlights how the reification of dis/ability, the naturalization of a bifurcated education system, and belief in the neutrality of schools' assessment practices are in fact ideological positions. Brantlinger (1997, 426) argues on the basis of her findings that a "pre-inclusion, business-as-usual special education is unfounded and unwise". Kauffman and his co-authors (2022; 2006, 66) in turn accuse "postmodernists" in education of intellectual dishonesty, and of touting non-scientific ideologies. Drawing on a positivist tradition of medical research, their suggested approach to how special education should progress is through "the effective application of willed effort and objective thought" (Kauffman and Sasso 2006, 67).

What becomes clear through these debates is that inclusive education is an arena where many contrasting ideas clash – special and inclusive,

medical and social models, positivism and postmodernism. I choose to include these debates here in order to provide a context for how later discussions in the field have developed. When current research production in the field is accused of being special education-research in disguise (Hansen et al. 2020; Nilholm 2021; Slee, Corcoran and Best 2019), this is an accusation that invokes and resonates with the sentiments aroused by these previous debates.

The radical potential of inclusive education consisted in its capacity to work as a replacement of special education, as a new paradigm that could contribute to the complete reimagining of how difference is dealt with in schools (Erevelles 2011; Graham and Slee 2008). However, as it has gone from ideas to practice in policy, schools, and research, inclusion and special education often become intertwined and the divisive lines between the two paradigms are blurred. In a Danish context, Hedegaard-Sørensen (2021) has suggested that this confusion is partly due to inclusive education being primarily discussed on a theoretical level in teacher education, rather than as an applied practice. With only normative understandings of inclusive education in their toolbox, teachers fall back on traditional, deficiency-based approaches when confronted with dis/ability in their classrooms., she argues.

The analysis in Chapter 6 centers on illuminating inclusive as well as deficiency-based logics in school practice as a way of calling attention to their differences in both reasoning and results, thus contributing to a conversation aimed at bridging the gap between inclusive theory and practice.

2.4. Rights-based and economic rationales in a Danish context

As was noted above, the Salamanca statement contains a mix of right-based and empirical claims that has left the document open to interpretation (Ainscow et al. 2019; Dyson 1999). In his thorough analysis of the notion of inclusion in the Salamanca statement, Magnússon (2019) concludes that the political elements of the statement are relatively toned down, which he accredits to the aspiration of making inclusive education into an international policy concept that should be operationalizable in a multitude of contexts. However, he notes that the statement contains traces of both welfare-state ideals – in its promotion of community, rights,

and education as a common good – as well as market ideals, as it emphasizes efficiency, individualization, and choice.

Danish educational policy has over the last decades seen an increase in influence from international policy actors like the OECD, especially through the PISA-program (Holloway and Hamre 2018). After receiving below average marks in the comparative testing scheme for competences like reading and math, an OECD report in 2004 suggested an increased focus on establishing a culture of evaluation in Denmark. In the following years, market values such as individual responsibility, competitiveness, and flexibility in terms of optimizing labor market participation became dominant, which led Pedersen (2011) to present the idea of an emerging competition state (Holloway and Hamre 2018). Following this, Larsen, Holloway and Hamre (2019) argue that schools have become the premier site of strengthening state competitiveness. Students are thereby reinvented as vehicles for the reproduction of capital. In a welfare state like Denmark, schools are a central space for challenging negative social heritage, reducing structural barriers to participation, and counteracting marginalization. In a competition state, however, schools are seen as the main production site of a competent work force that will enhance national competitiveness in the global marketplace. This analysis is echoed in international research on inclusive education, which consistently highlights how inclusive policies become characterized and contradicted by a simultaneous enactment of neoliberal economic agendas (Graham 2007; Hardy and Woodcook 2015; Slee 2018)

In 2010 a national testing program was introduced in Denmark, testing students in a range of subjects such as English, mathematics, reading, and geography (Engsig and Johnstone 2015). Although the results of the tests, after some initial controversy, came to be reserved for the department of education and the schools themselves rather than made available for a more high-stakes accountability model of comparison, the introduction of national testing was a decisive step toward an accountability regime in Danish education. Hamre, Morin and Ydesen (2018) have linked this development to a globalized testing culture in which accountability and competitive market logics overtake concern for individual rights and social justice. Larsen et al. (2019) have observed that marginalization, rather than being counteracted, is emphasized as testing procedures and optimization agendas create an increasingly narrow perception of normality. In such a

climate, student differences are only acceptable if they do not interfere with performance in standardized testing schemes. As is argued by Hansen and Bjørnsrud (2018), in a neoliberal performance discourse everyone becomes responsible for their own educational successes but also for their own educational failures, which contributes to the continued prospering of deficiency narratives in education. This argument was also prominent in Tomlinsson's (2012) critique of what she calls the "special educational needs industry," a system that disproportionality affects, and further stigmatizes, children in already vulnerable social positions.

A number of high profile Danish educational researchers (e.g. Holst, Langager and Tetler 2000; Tetler 2000) had made a push for a more justice-based approach to inclusive education and saw it as a means to reform the school system in a more equity-oriented way. However, when Denmark in 2012 formally introduced inclusion as a highly prioritized political agenda with the so-called inclusion-law, this measure followed upon a period of heightened scrutiny of government spending in the school system (Hamre 2018). The implementation of inclusion thus became enmeshed in an efficacy discourse (Dyson 1999), where inclusive systems were promoted as the most cost-effective models of schooling, which removed the critical reform angle of inclusive education from the conversation. Instead, inclusion became associated with the ambition of producing more students capable of participation in the labor market (Hamre 2018).

In 2014, shortly after the formal introduction of inclusive education, several other quantifiable targets were introduced into the Danish school system. These included increasing each student's well-being, reducing the percentage of students with the poorest results, and annually increasing the percentage of the most proficient students (Engsig and Johnstone 2015). Additionally, the reform established a national goal that 80% of students be proficient in reading and math. As noted by Engsig and Johnstone (2015), this new goal-oriented accountability approach to schooling paradoxically contradicts the simultaneous focus on including more students from special schools in mainstream education – especially when it is taken into account that educational spending was decreased by 12% per student in this same period. Similarly, Larsen et al. (2019) argue that the focus on testing undermines efforts to create inclusive school environments that genuinely embrace diversity in students. They contend

that when schools use a test regime that targets underperforming students, a consequence of this measure is the promotion of an understanding of difference that frames individual students as carriers of problems. The solutions that are sought, then, are a matter of trying to fix these problem-bearing students rather than broadening the perception of what constitutes normality.

As described by Hamre (2018) in his historical overview of the inclusion agenda in a Danish context, the way in which inclusion and the focus on reduced spending on special education became interweaved in this period has come to characterize inclusive education in Denmark ever since. In the process of moving from ideas and theories to practice, discursive tensions between social justice and accountability within inclusive education were transformed into real practical incongruencies. This is exemplified by the expectation of a continuing rise in average grades at the same time as more diverse learner profiles are retained and included in general education.

Five years after the inclusion law came into effect, in 2016 an evaluation by an expert group deployed by the Danish Ministry for Children, Education, and Gender Equality stated that the law had succeeded in creating a large transfer of students from special schools into mainstream classes. However, they also stated that many barriers remained for inclusive education in practice (Jørgensen et al. 2016). Acknowledging how inclusive education had been launched in conjunction with a range of other academic and organizational priorities, as mentioned above, and how this might negatively impact its implementation, the group put forward recommendations for future work with inclusion in Denmark. Among these recommendations was a focus on language, noting that inclusion had become synonymous with placement rather than the development of learning environments. The group also remarked on the contradiction inherent in schools being measured by students' academic success but not in the same way held accountable for other forms of progress and development. As a direct result of the rapport, a previously stated 96% target of inclusion in general schooling was abolished. The group suggested that having such a target had shifted focus away from the creation and support of inclusive learning environments for all children, to instead become an end in itself (Jørgensen et al. 2016).

2.5. Finding a middle ground

Addressing the "bipolar activity pattern" in Danish special education services, the Ministry of Finance put forward a report in 2010 that urged municipalities to find more middle ground between high intensity support in segregated special schools and lower scale support in the mainstream classroom (Tegtmejer and Jørgensen 2022, 3). The purpose of such middle ground alternatives would be to enable part time support of some students labelled with special needs, thus bridging the definitive either-or of special education and general education. This request for more flexibility and flow between school forms was also echoed by the expert group in 2016 (Jørgensen et al. 2016). As noted by Tegtmejer and Jørgensen (2022), a subsequent development in half of the country's municipalities has been the introduction of a segregation charge, meaning that the financial responsibility for a student in a segregated special school environment is transferred to the schools' own budget, rather than being allocated centrally by the municipality. Together with the continued political focus on inclusive learning environments, this economic incentive has pushed an increasing number of schools into introducing intermediary forms of schooling that blur the lines between special education and general education (Lindeberg et al. 2021). The term "middle forms" (in Danish: mellemformer) has come to denote organizational models where students participate partly in the activities of their general classroom and at other times are segregated into a different group where they receive specialized instruction (Tegtmejer and Jørgensen 2022). Lindeberg et al. (2021) distinguish between two main versions of middle forms in use in Danish schools, where the first, as described above, separates students into different groups for a set number of hours every week, while the rest of the time is spent in the original mainstream classroom. In the second model, resources and accommodations are instead added to the mainstream classroom, enabling participation from there. Alenkær (2022) describes the potential of middle forms, noting that they transcend traditional organization by taking a point of departure in the specific needs of students. With their focus on participation, he argues, these models represent a new and more flexible way to approach educational support that can further inclusive education. However, Spangsberg and Ydesen (2024) contend that students in middle forms are often excluded from the mainstream class community they are supposedly rooted in. Using a posthuman approach, these authors explore how middle form organizing

produces boundaries between students. Their findings indicate that mainstream teachers do not view these students as part of the class, nor are they included in symbolic activities, such as decorating the classroom door with all the students' names. Spangsberg and Ydesen (2024) conclude that, rather than serving as a pathway to more inclusive learning environments, the middle form can come to undermine students' belonging, functioning as a new form of exclusion. I discuss an empirical example involving a middle form in the article "In Search of a DisSchool". The analysis highlights the importance of how the purposes and practicalities of such models are negotiated as determining factors for their inclusive potential.

2.6. Establishing a context for research

In reflecting on the rich body of literature surrounding inclusive education, several key themes emerge. The foundational challenge of defining inclusive education underscores the complexity and diversity within the field. Since the Salamanca Statement, the concept of inclusion has been the subject of ongoing debate, with some emphasizing physical placement and others advocating a broader focus on community, participation, and belonging. These differing perspectives reveal a divided field, where inclusion is understood and approached in multiple, often conflicting ways. Scholars like Florian (2019), Slee (2011, 2018) and Thomazet (2009) argue that inclusive education at its core is a challenge to normative assumptions and practices in mainstream schools and therefore requires a rethinking of the school system. Rather than managing diversity as if it were a problem, an inclusive school system is organized with difference as its point of departure. Such a position highlights the normative change of perspectives that form an integral part of inclusive education, tracing back to its inception as a critique of the marginalization and stigma brought by a naturalized bifurcation into general and special education organization throughout history.

In this chapter, I have paid specific attention to the influence of economic and accountability-driven agendas on inclusive education. Both policy and practice face contradictions as a consequence of these agendas. Inclusive education entered the educational space in Denmark marked by the preceding focus on cost-effectiveness, accountability, and measurable outcomes in academic performance. As I have shown, research suggests that the way performance culture and budgetary concerns have co-

constructed inclusive education has contributed to a narrower conception of the successful student, which essentially contradicts the principles of the inclusion agenda. According to Larsen et al. (2019), the discourses surrounding the introduction of inclusion as a political policy therefore came to signal an ambivalent attitude towards diversity, arising from the clash between welfare state and competition state discourses.

In sum, inspired by concepts encountered as I navigated the literature as well as the experiences of my participants, in this chapter I have constructed a context for the research results presented in this dissertation. In my next chapter I turn to the task of presenting the theoretical framework that has guided my work.

Chapter 3. Framing dis/ability and affect: a theoretical lens on inclusive education

This theoretical chapter develops the theoretical framework for understanding inclusive education in Danish schools through the lens of *critical dis/ability studies* and *affect*. I introduce key ideas from dis/ability studies, tracing its origins in rights-based activism and the emergence of the social model of dis/ability, which redefined dis/ability as a socio-material construct rather than as an individual deficit. The chapter also addresses critiques of the social model, focusing in particular on the tension between impairment and dis/ability, and emphasizing the relational and constructed nature of these concepts.

The *crip*-branch of critical dis/ability studies is introduced as a critical tool for reimagining normative structures in education. The chapter also briefly discusses *dis/ability studies in education*, a subfield of dis/ability studies focused on educational contexts. This emerging field, to which this dissertation contributes, critically examines the pathologization of students with learning differences and emphasizes inclusion as a process of rethinking school structures and interactions, rather than focusing solely on physical placement.

Building on this foundation, the chapter integrates *affect theory*–particularly Ahmed's concept of affective economies–to explore how emotions attached to inclusive education shape professional practices. These theoretical perspectives form the foundation for examining how dis/ability is produced and mobilized within Danish schools, while also opening possibilities for a more inclusive future.

3.1. Ableism and disablism: structural roots of exclusion

Critical dis/ability studies scholars are overarchingly interested in exploring the production of dis/ability in a society built on structural *ableism* and *disablism*. These two concepts have sometimes been used interchangeably to refer to the same process of marginalization (Campbell 2009). Australian scholar Fiona Campbell, one of the key authors of critical ableist studies, has, however, argued for the subtle yet decisive differences between the two notions. Disablism, she contends, should be

understood as "a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities" (Campbell 2009, 4). Disablism thus denotes the discriminatory attitudes and practices deriving from them that lead to the systematic exclusion of dis/abled people from public life. Ableism, on the other hand, turns the gaze the other way, towards the construction of a conception of normality that produces disablism. Ableism is the systematic favoritism of a specific set of abilities, bodily compositions, and appearances (Goodley 2014). It is the assumption and anticipation of specific functionalities that at its core signifies "a naturalized understanding of being fully human" (Campbell 2009, 6). As an analogy, disablism could be equated to sexism, while ableism equates to the patriarchy as it functions as the overarching system that values certain aspects of being human over others. In the context of this dissertation and the specific area of education, ableism will be understood as the assumption and constant veneration of a bell curve student, namely, the obedient, productive, performing student who fulfills normative bodily expectations in terms of their behavior, emotions, and functionality. At the same time, ableism supports the acceptance and naturalization of exclusion and the continuing pathologization of difference in learning.

3.2. The social model and beyond: debates and development

Dis/ability studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that gained ground in the momentum created by rights-based activism in the US in the 1950s (Gleeson 1997). As a field, it is fundamentally concerned with rights for dis/abled people in all arenas of society and has deep ties to dis/ability rights activism (Chennat 2019). It is a social-justice driven discipline that takes a point in departure in dis/ability as a site of oppression, and aims to examine the production of attitudes and barriers that discriminate and disable (Campbell 2009; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Slee, Corcoran and Best (2019) describe this as the "ideological transparency" of dis/ability studies, as scholars in this stream of thought and practice, myself included, are motivated by the prospect of overturning ableist structures and contributing to a more inclusive society for all. The social model of dis/ability that was theorized by dis/ability activists in the 1970s identified a clear path forward for the dis/ability movement (Chennat 2019). If society is producing barriers that hinder the full and equal

participation of people with impairments, then the solution is to work towards removing those barriers (Shakespeare 2014). The move away from a deficit approach and a medical model and toward an antidiscrimination approach was emancipatory for many dis/abled people as it moved the imperative of change from them to society.

The two models of dis/ability represent opposing ontological positions. In the medical model, dis/ability is viewed as a consequence of impairment or illness, which positions the individual body as the site of deficiency and intervention (Thomas 2004). The social model frames dis/ability instead as a consequence of societal barriers, rooted in capitalist value systems that devalue bodies perceived as deviating from some evaluative norm. Emerging from materialist critique, the social model was instrumental in exposing how oppression and disablism are reproduced through societal organization. Breaking the link between impairment and dis/ability was seen as a crucial step in countering the medical model's individualizing and pathologizing framework (Reindal 2016).

Several different theoretical strains of dis/ability studies grew out of the impairment/dis/ability distinction and the clash between medical and social model perspectives. One of these was critical dis/ability studies, a branch that leans heavily on poststructuralist conceptions of power and oppression. Garland-Thomson (2002) posits dis/ability as the systematic marking of bodies as subordinate, a labelling practice that produces inequality in tandem with intersecting categories of social identity. When we understand dis/ability this way, namely as a cultural system, it becomes possible to examine the "fabricated narratives of the body" (Garland-Thomson 2002, 5), similarly to how we explore the discursive productions of race and gender: as fictitious but with real life consequences manifested as discriminatory practices (Garland-Thomson 2005).

The critical dis/ability studies strain thus privileges the exploration of socially produced dis/ability and its consequences. This move has been a source of contention within dis/ability studies. Shakespeare (2014) offers a critical perspective, arguing that dis/ability cannot be fully understood as a socially constructed phenomenon. He warns that focusing on the discursive dimensions of dis/ability risks neglecting the biological realities of impairment, which often include limitation, incapacity, pain, or frailty:

> disability always has a biological dimension that usually entails limitation or incapacity, and sometimes frailty and pain. These aspects of disability can be modified or mitigated by environmental change or social intervention, but often cannot be entirely removed. They are not just a matter of culture or language (2014, 49).

Shakespeare (2014) thus argues for dis/ability studies to remain connected to issues of the body and the "real" implications of impairment. In contrast, theorists from critical dis/ability studies argue that the construction of impairment as a pure physical reality that can be accessed in an unmediated way is problematic (Cooper 2020). To use the analogy of sex and gender, sex is often similarly construed as an essential biological property when both sex and gender are in fact accessed through a socially constructed language and cultural lens (Garland-Thomson 2005). Socially produced ideas and values about dis/ability and impairment will in this perspective always co-construct personal experience as well as oppressive structures, fundamentally negating a binary understanding (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Dis/ability as social oppression is no less "real" than the biological impairment.

Garland-Thomson (2005:1558) writes about feminist dis/ability studies that it "tends to avoid impairment-specific or medical diagnostic categories to think about dis/ability." This is because the focus of studies in this branch, as mentioned, is more interested in the values that are attributed to different bodies than their shape, form, function, or other specificities. According to Garland-Thomson, critical dis/ability studies research highlights:

> how people with a wide range of physical, mental, and emotional differences are collectively imagined as defective and excluded from an equal place in the social order. Social categories parallel to "disabled," such as "people of color" or "queer," also embrace a wide range of varying physical characteristics, identities, and subjective experiences, even while they risk flattening significant differences. Such social—rather than biological—labels accurately capture the single, reductive, exclusionary social category that conflates and stigmatizes a range of differences according to a subordinating discourse (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1558).

In keeping with these considerations, the arguments and narrative of this dissertation focus on the social and structural production of dis/ability in Danish schools, particularly as shaped by the political goal of making schools more inclusive of learner diversity. This approach shifts the emphasis away from impairment and personal lived experience, centering instead on how dis/ability is produced—whether through deficiency-based understandings or affective orientations—rather than focusing on any specific dis/abled person or group.

In this framework, it is assumed that all children in schools are at risk of becoming dis/abled, with their equal participation hindered either continuously or at specific moments, depending on contextual arrangements. However, the interaction of impairment, context, and other embodied social markers means that some children will occupy the dis/abled position more frequently than others. This relational understanding underscores the importance of examining how dis/ability is enacted and negotiated within school environments.

While this perspective disembodies the dis/abled position, moving it from the realm of subjective experience into a theoretical discussion, the dissertation remains aligned with the emancipatory ambitions of dis/ability studies by critically interrogating dis/abling practices in schools. At the same time, this choice of perspective raises questions about whose voices are heard or privileged in the analysis—issues that will be addressed in greater depth in the methodological chapter.

3.3. Critical dis/ability studies: challenging normativity and ableism

Dis/ability studies serves as the parent field from which critical dis/ability studies emerged, emphasizing the intersection of dis/ability and power relations. Critical dis/ability studies examines a range of topics concerning ideas about dis/ability and their dominion across time and space, as well as their enforcement in policy and practice. Building on the legacy of critical sociology, feminist studies, queer studies, as well as the recent posthuman and new material turns in social theory, dis/ability is the point of departure for critical dis/ability studies, but it is never the endpoint; rather it is a gateway to thinking about theoretical and practical issues relevant to society at large (Goodley 2013). With an intersectional outlook, often evoking the similarities of discriminatory structures faced across social categories of race, class, gender and ability, critical dis/ability studies

connects dis/ability to the cultural study of the body and thus opens new doors to discussions about the production of normality, the social construction of identity, and the production and manifestation of structural discrimination (Garland-Thomson 2002; 2005; Goodley 2013). In critical dis/ability studies, dis/ability is understood as an effect of power relations and as a provocation of constructions of normality (Goodley 2014). Garland-Thomson (2002) posits dis/ability as the systematic marking of bodies as subordinate, a labelling practice that produces inequality in tandem with intersecting categories of social identity. When we understand dis/ability this way, namely, as a cultural system, it becomes possible to examine the "fabricated narratives of the body" in a way that is similar to how we explore the discursive productions of race and gender: as fictitious, but with real life consequences manifested as discriminatory practices (Garland-Thomson 2005).

According to Garland-Thomson (2002), dis/ability has four main aspects: a) it is a system of interpreting and disciplining bodily variations, b) it is a relationship between bodies and their environment, c) it is a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the dis/abled, and d) it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self. Moreover, and most importantly, dis/ability is a very broad and all-encompassing term, describing stigmatic positions ranging from physical to cognitive ones, those based on appearance and mental factors, and both those that are visible and invisible, all of which come together to form a social class branded by exclusion (Garland- Thomson 2005).

Critical dis/ability studies thus continues to build on the theoretical developments of earlier dis/ability studies by integrating and synthesizing with other transformative agendas, like those suggested by feminist, postcolonial, queer and posthuman studies. The relationship with class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity is often explicated while foregrounding how these categories interplay to enhance, and co-produce dis/ability (Goodley et al. 2021). Such a foregrounding of categories entails exploring "whose bodies and minds are valued or permitted to thrive, whose aren't and by what means" (Jarman and Kafer 2014, 2). Undertaking this foregrounding involves naming and centering body politics in the exploration of a current social order heavily influenced by capitalism and neoliberal conceptions of productivity, individualism, and performance (Goodley 2014; McRuer 2018). The critical dis/ability

branch builds on the materialist implications of the social model, constituting dis/ability as a type of oppression produced within a capitalist system (Sanmiquel-Molinero and Pujol-Tarrés 2019). Critiques of the neoliberal economic model are fundamentally incorporated in critical dis/ability studies, as societal expectations of normality in capitalist economies hinge on individual citizens' contribution through their interaction with the labor market. Fundamental societal values like autonomy, productivity, and independence are tied to the image of the abled-bodied worker (Goodley 2014). Dis/ability is therefore crystallized as it is measured against norms produced as a consequence of neoliberal capitalism.

3.3.1. Cripping critical dis/ability studies

Like other branches of critical studies that inspire critical dis/ability studies, the latter is concerned with bridging binaries and transforming thinking about dis/ability. This work is especially pursued as part of the crip-imaginary, a theoretical strain developed along similar lines as queer theory and with the same intention of disrupting and rearranging normative thought around its subject. Like the word "queer," "crip" was originally a derogatory term used against dis/abled people that activists have reclaimed and reinfused with rebellious new meaning (Sandahl 2003). Used both as noun, adjective, and verb, crip has become a method for twisting and turning normality expectations and opening new perspectives (McRuer 2018, 13). To crip means to see the world differently, to resist and question ableist interpretations of social life. While queer theory talks about compulsory heterosexuality as an all-enforcing norm, crip theory suggests compulsory abledbodiness as its intersectional companion (Bierdz 2024). Thinking with crip theory involves not only the questioning of norms in ableist society, but also of essentializing and conservative norms within the parent stream of dis/ability studies (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Furthermore, and maybe the most radical of all, crip theory challenges us to imagine dis/ability and the dis/abled body as desirable, as not only acceptable and includable but worth celebrating in its own right (McRuer 2006). Crip theory invites us to think about difference in the body or mind without the traditional charges of pity and lack, but as valuable contributions and perspectives on human experience.

In this dissertation, the crip inspiration is salient in the notion of dis/ability as a productive disruption and harbinger of opportunity for the

development of a more inclusive school system. It is explicitly put to work analytically in chapter 6. Inspired by crip theory, I work from a position where the normal and desired student is contingent and historically produced in different ways, consistently intertwined with capitalist and more recently neoliberal economic models that coproduce ideas of valuable bodies and subjectivities (Goodley 2014). Goodley (2014, 26) has even suggested that we are seeing a particular *neoliberal-ableism*, as individualism and self-reliance are continually cherished and social welfare in many places is cut in the name of financial austerity. In such times, ability is the capacity to perform academically according to bell curve imaginations, and be obedient, autonomous and move on to contribute to an effective labor force (Araneda-Urrutia and Infante 2020).

3.4. Dis/ability studies in education: rethinking inclusion

Approaching inclusive education from the angle of dis/ability studies aims at a critique of the historical and ongoing pathologization of students who are unable to live up to the strict normative and ableist expectations of our current society (Goodley 2018). This is a society and educational system in which more and more people are faced with bearing a diagnostic label throughout their entire lifetime (Brinkmann 2016). Social inclusion has always been an important topic for dis/ability studies (Chennat 2019) and from the perspective of dis/ability studies in education, inclusive education is a necessity and obvious goal. The aim is ultimately to bring about a wider understanding of human variability and diversities in capabilities by challenging the ideas of normality when it comes to learning and schooling (Annamma, Boele, Moore and Klingner 2013; Baglieri and Knopf 2004). In realizing that aim, the application of dis/ability studies to education challenges the dominant conceptions of difference as pertaining to medical paradigms and instead shines light on the disabling constructions afforded by special education. The consistent fight against the lingering dominance of medical models of dis/ability in schools is a core undertaking for scholars working in this field. These ambitions are also central to my analytical work in chapter 6.

When it comes to inclusive education, working from a critical dis/ability perspective and building on the emerging field of dis/ability studies in education thus brings me to the following points of departure. First, inclusion and inclusive education are necessary to bring about a school system that caters to all of its students. Inclusive processes demand a

rethinking of both organizational structures and classroom practices as well as a constant critical evaluation of how the purpose of schooling is negotiated and communicated through both policy and practice (Tefeera and Fischmann 2020). Second, as I put forward in Chapter 1, the theoretical alliance with critical dis/ability studies allows for a broad conception of inclusive education in terms of efforts directed at the participation of all children in school. This is a confrontation with the idea of inclusion as place. Inclusive education is not about where the students are; rather, it is a matter of the quality of the interactions and frameworks to which they are invited. Building on this foundation, I explore how thinking with dis/ability in inclusive education can disrupt ableist expectations of normality and enable change toward more inclusive practices.

3.5. Affect and dis/ability: emotional dimensions of inclusion

In chapter 7 of this dissertation, I approach inclusive education as an affective economy. Drawing on Ahmed's (2014b) relational model of affect, this chapter illuminates the emotions that stick to, produce, and are produced by the phenomenon of inclusion as it circulates within the educational landscape. In this section I explore some connections between theories of affect and critical dis/ability studies so as to illuminate their complementary approaches to the study of education.

The theoretical leap from a critical dis/ability perspective to the world of affect is not hard to make – in fact there are already many bridges that facilitate this move. Goodley, Liddiard and Runswick-Cole (2018, 206) have, for example, argued that dis/ability "can and should be an entry point into studies of affect." As described above, critical dis/ability studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws theoretical inspiration from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and new materialist studies – much of the same thinking that has also informed recent developments in studies of affect. The intersection of affect and critical dis/ability thereby invites us to consider how dis/ability becomes produced as an affective object and what affects do to co-constitute societal perceptions of the dis/abled body in our time. In this vein, Mikuluk et al. (2024) have used affect theory to explore the stickiness and emotional work that surrounds the label "behaviors that challenge others," while Naraian (2021) has suggested that affective perspectives can offer new insights into teacher orientations in relation to inclusive education. Moreover, Goodley (2018) has directed

attention to the potential of affect theory to explore ableist hierarchies of emotion that denote what bodies are allowed to feel happy or proud and how emotions of shame, pity, and disgust stick to other bodies. Just like critical dis/ability, then, theories of affect are interested in the production of positions, orientations, and social order. In line with critical dis/ability studies' view of dis/ability, affect is relational and socially constructed while situated in time and space. Furthermore, both perspectives also foreground aspects of the body that are often pushed aside and marginalized as points of departure for knowledge production.

This dissertation draws on Ahmed's theoretical framework regarding affect. It is grounded in her conceptualization of affect as a relational and productive force that shapes and is shaped by the objects, bodies, and figures it circulates between (2014b). Ahmed's "outside-in" model, inspired by Heidegger, views emotions as socially produced rather than individually held, emphasizing their emergence through relational dynamics. Ahmed introduces the concept of the affective economy to describe the ways emotions move, accumulate, and create associations that shape relationships and practices. Reworking a Marxist analysis of economies—where capital gains value through circulation rather than holding inherent value—Ahmed conceives of affects as similarly gaining intensity and meaning through their circulation in social and material contexts (Staunæs, Hvenegård-Lassen, and Bissenbakker 2024). Central to this idea is the notion of "stickiness," which captures how emotions adhere to certain objects, bodies, or figures, intensifying their affective charge and influencing how they are understood and experienced. Within the affective economy of inclusive education, the figure of the "inclusion-child," for example, can be seen as a sticky figure, layered with emotions that reflect its historical and social complexity. Ahmed's concept of orientation further illuminates how emotions direct actions and focus. Described as "a matter of how we reside in space" (Ahmed 2006, 543), orientation provides a lens for understanding how school professionals position themselves toward or away from inclusive education work in practice.

In short, leaning on Ahmed's affective apparatus illuminates how inclusive education can be seen as an affective economy, where emotionally charged sticky objects circulate within the educational landscape. In the article "Caught in a Bad Mood: The Affective Economy of Inclusive Education," I establish that inclusive education is caught in a "bad mood" as it has

become stuck in narratives of failure and resistance that have triggered the questioning of its relevance as a pedagogical agenda. While the dissertation employs critical dis/ability studies to describe how an ableist system produces the social category of dis/ability, working with affect from within a critical dis/ability studies framework offers specific insights into how ableist systems are affectively sustained.

3.6. The theoretical framework of the dissertation

This dissertation's exploration of inclusive education in Danish schools is informed by the interplay of the theoretical perspectives outlined in this chapter. Critical dis/ability studies provides the overarching framework, enabling a nuanced examination of how dis/ability is socially, culturally, and materially constructed within educational practices. By adopting a social constructivist lens, this dissertation positions dis/ability as an emergent and contingent phenomenon shaped by the historically situated values and norms that define ability and normality. This understanding is pivotal for unpacking how inclusive education both challenges and reproduces these norms through its enactment in schools. By emphasizing inclusion as a quality of interaction rather than as a matter of physical placement, the theoretical direction unfolded here underscores the necessity of reimagining educational structures and practices so as to accommodate all students. Inspiration from crip theory becomes visible in the dissertation's aim to view dis/ability not as a challenge to be overcome but as a productive disruption that holds transformative potential for the school system. Lastly, the integration of affect theory enriches this analysis by shedding light on the emotional dimensions of inclusive education. Inclusion is not merely a set of practices or policies; it is also a site of emotional investment, conflict, and negotiation. Chapter 7 is dedicated to the exploration of the emotions circulating in the sticky layers of inclusive education and how these affect school professionals' relationship with the concept in practice. By combining lenses from critical dis/ability studies, its offshoot crip theory, and a theory of affect, this chapter provides a multi-dimensional framework for analyzing inclusive education and sets up the dissertation's critical project of interrogating how dis/ability is produced and mobilized within Danish schools. The theoretical perspectives introduced here are directly applied in the three chapters:

- **Chapter 5** builds on the reflexive and (self)-critical ambitions of critical dis/ability studies to address the methodological challenges involved in researching inclusive education, focusing on how to resist reproducing individualized narratives while maintaining a structural lens.

- **Chapter 6** explores the tensions between deficit-based and inclusive logics in Danish schools, highlighting how these competing frameworks shape pedagogical practices, suggesting a crip approach to challenge ableist norms.

- **Chapter 7** draws on affect theory to explore the emotional dimensions of inclusive education, analyzing how emotions circulate with practices and figures like the "inclusion child" and shape orientations toward inclusion.

By weaving these theoretical threads together, this dissertation approaches inclusive education as a site of contestation and possibility. It seeks not only to analyze how dis/ability is produced within the Danish school system but also to contribute to the broader critical project of imagining and enacting more inclusive futures. In my next, methodological chapter, I will delineate how these theoretical orientations shaped, and were shaped by, my empirical work.

Chapter 4. Reflexivity in action: exploring inclusion with a critical dis/ability lens

In this chapter, I describe and reflect on the methodological choices I have made throughout this project, situating them within the broader theoretical framework of critical dis/ability studies. Drawing on Minich's (2016) articulation of critical dis/ability as a mode of analysis, I approach my methodology as a site for interrogating the normative logics that shape inclusive education. This reflexive and norm-critical stance extends beyond simply identifying instances of exclusion or inclusion in schools. Instead, it involves critically examining how inclusion itself is framed, enacted, and contested within a broader normative framework. As Schalk (2017) emphasizes in her extension of Minich's argument, critical dis/ability studies is not dependent on a fixed object of analysis—such as dis/ability as a category—but is instead a theoretical and methodological stance that interrogates the norms and structures that produce difference and marginalization. This distinction is particularly valuable for a study of inclusive education, where the focus is not on students labeled with "special educational needs" but on the broader processes through which inclusion is constructed and practiced in schools.

The chapter traces how this norm-critical perspective shaped not only the questions asked but also the ways of asking, interpreting, and engaging with the field. Central to this approach is the concept of reflexivity, which aligns with the counter-hegemonic commitments of critical dis/ability studies. As a field, critical dis/ability studies challenges dominant framings of dis/ability, which have historically individualized, pathologized, medicalized, and depoliticized the phenomenon (Goodley et al., 2019). Reflexivity, similarly, implies a critique of hegemonic traditions achieved by interrogating how research itself is constructed and how researchers are implicated in the production of knowledge. (Pillow 2003, Berger 2015). One of the debates concerning reflexivity has concerned a development of practice that, some have argued, overemphasizes static markers of social identity (Pillow, 2003; Skeggs, 2002). Reflexivity thus becomes a confessional practice that by ticking some boxes absolves the researcher from any shortcomings attributable to their social positioning. Following this critique, Davis (2014) argues that the endless listing of social categories to reflect a position in the field does little work in terms of

analytically and reflexively understanding that position. In contrast, a practice of reflexivity should be less about the researcher's confessions and more about a practice of continual reflection on positions in the field and their epistemological implications throughout the research process.

In this study, reflexivity means critically examining not only how inclusive education is framed and practiced but also interrogating the assumptions embedded in the research process itself. This is a matter of reflecting on how knowledge is constructed, and questioning how we, as researchers, might reproduce or disrupt normative ideologies (Goodley et al., 2019). Reflexivity, in this sense, is not merely a methodological tool; it is instead an ethical imperative for navigating the theoretical and practical challenges of applying a critical dis/ability gaze. With dis/ability as a methodological lens, this study centers the examination of how ableism shapes educational contexts and how such norms are enacted, reproduced, or disrupted in schools. To that end the study combined ethnography and interviews within a qualitative framework.

The empirical material was produced over a two-year period, beginning with interviews conducted from December 2021 to February 2024. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out from June 2022 to June 2023, during which time I followed a primary school class and their teachers in their everyday school routines. My ethnographic engagement included attending lessons, participating in field trips and excursions, and observing projects and classroom activities. I also attended teacher meetings, including two "grade conferences" involving all three classes in the grade. Finally, I designed a group interview for the students in the class, which was facilitated by their teachers. This chapter addresses these methods within the larger framework of approaching methodology with critical reflexivity at the core of critical dis/ability studies. This understanding of reflexivity as both a theoretical and methodological imperative, shaped not only the data collection process but also the broader questions and ethical considerations of this project.

In this chapter, I use a reflexive approach as my guiding thread as I introduce the epistemological, contextual, and methodological considerations that have shaped the production of empirical materials. In so doing I hope to convey how all parts of this study, from engagement with theory, to my choice of methods, and the practicalities of interviews and fieldwork have all been part of a continuous, reflexive, and analytical

process. Starting with the constructivist underpinnings and a description of the context of this study, the chapter goes on to present and reflect in turn on the choice and practicality of the methods, interviews, and ethnography. Thereafter follow descriptions of my positioning and relationships in light of my ethical commitments in the field. Finally, I reflect on the organization of empirical materials through transcription and coding practices and address some overarching and formal ethical questions.

4.1. A constructivist lens on dis/ability and inclusion

As is argued by Naraian (2021, 300), exploring inclusive education from a dis/ability perspective:

> begins by inquiring into the ways schooling structures and classroom practice permit (or disallow) students who bring diverse learning profiles (with and without labels of disability) to learn in an equitable manner.

In keeping with this observation, in all of the empirical work I conducted my attention was directed toward the practical enactment of inclusive education, understood as any actions or initiatives aimed at creating the class community, socially and academically. A specific point of interest was the ways in which school norms and structures were altered, bent, and transformed in the quest to accommodate student differences.

In chapter 3 I referred to Garland-Thomson's assertion of (feminist) critical dis/ability studies as a way of exploring narratives of the body as constructed but with real life implications. Such implications manifest themselves for example as discriminatory practices or embodied impairment effects like pain or discomfort (Garland-Thomson 2005). Building on this insight, I approach inclusion with a constructivist ontology and realist epistemology, emphasizing how the world is socially constructed yet experienced as real. With inspiration from the philosophical work on constructivism by Chouliarki (2002), dis/ability can be conceived as a constructed lens for interpreting variations in bodies and minds, producing effects on identity and value that are real to us in both discursive, material, and psychosocial terms. Dis /ability should therefore be explored on that premise.

As I have explained above, I understand educational inclusion as a situated and open-ended phenomenon concerning all children in school. I furthermore define dis/ability as a socio-materially produced value system that assigns meaning to bodies by positioning them in relation to normative expectations of ability. These understandings inform my focus on dismantling disabling norms rather than "fixing" individuals. What is emphasized is the importance of challenging the structures and practices that produce exclusion. At the same time, this perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in shaping inclusive practices.

4.2. Methods for exploring inclusion as a situated phenomenon

To explore the production of dis/ability within an inclusive education framework, I have chosen interviews and ethnography as my primary methods for generating empirical material. Ethnography facilitates an analysis of how inclusion is enacted and negotiated in specific school environments, while interviews provide access to diverse perspectives on how inclusion is negotiated, understood, and affectively experienced. Together, these methods allow me to investigate inclusion as a situated, processual phenomenon, dynamically shaped by context, actors, and structural conditions. The choice to conduct ethnography and interview school leaders, teachers, students, and municipal coordinators stems from the commitment to viewing inclusion as a phenomenon that is co-constructed through multiple perspectives. Capturing these diverse perspectives was crucial to illuminating the multi-dimensional aspects of inclusion enactment in schools.

Harnessing the complementary strengths of ethnography and interviews allowed for a multifaceted approach to inclusive education, capturing both processes and meanings. Ethnography is an approach particularly suited to exploring the construction of social phenomenon in everyday contexts, while also offering insights into ambivalence, contradictions, and transformative potentials (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Skeggs 2002). With its focus on everyday interactions and practices, ethnography contributes rich practice perspectives that might not emerge in an interview setting. At the same time, interviews offer direct access to participants' meaning-making and their reflections on lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Together, these methods allowed me to approach inclusion as a phenomenon that is simultaneously structural and

experiential, co-constructed through the interplay of actors, norms, and material conditions.

My approach to methods was also shaped by what Staunæs (2004) calls "empirical triggers" and what MacLure (2013) refers to as "wonder"—concepts that capture how data can "talk back" to researchers and guide their analytical focus. For example, the affective turn in this dissertation emerged inductively, as I observed the ways in which affect consistently wove through and characterized the empirical material. These moments of empirical wonder sharpened my attention to the emotional dimensions of inclusion, highlighting how inclusion is not only structured in policy or discourse but is also affectively experienced and negotiated in practice. This openness to following unexpected threads in the data reflects an iterative approach, where methods and analysis are in constant dialogue.

4.3. Teachers as mediators of structure and practice

The empirical focus privileges teachers' voices, as their work as "inclusion-facilitators" and enactors of normative boundaries in the classroom became a central concern during the ethnographic part of the study. This choice reflects my commitment to a structural approach to inclusion, which centers on the ways institutional and systemic conditions produce dis/ability and shape possibilities for inclusion. While inclusion is the outcome of a range of practices in schools—spanning organizational structures, meeting formats, the involvement of school psychologists, and even the way recess is structured (Hansen et al., 2020)—teachers stand at the center of these processes. It is through their concrete actions in the classroom that these structures, discourses, and normative frameworks are enacted, resisted, or transformed. Whether these actions align with or contradict official narratives, teachers ultimately bring policy to life, which makes them critical actors in the structural production of inclusion. Following Ball, Maguire, and Brown (2012), I view teachers as "policy enactors" whose everyday practices reveal how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and translated into lived realities.

This focus on teachers' voices does not diminish the importance of the perspectives of other actors, including children, school leaders, and municipal coordinators. All of these voices have been crucial for illuminating the co-constructed nature of inclusion, and their contributions are present throughout the empirical material. However, my

analyses weigh teachers' voices more heavily because of their unique position as mediators between the structural and the everyday. Teachers occupy a role where systemic logics and normative frameworks intersect with the affective, relational, and pedagogical dynamics of the classroom. Their actions and narratives reveal how inclusion is produced, maintained, or contested on the ground, making them a central lens for understanding how dis/ability operates in practice.

Student voices also played an important role in this study. Through group interviews facilitated by their teachers, I sought to understand how students themselves experience elements of inclusion and exclusion in the classroom. These insights provided valuable perspectives on how children negotiate norms and boundaries among peers, as well as how they perceive the actions of their teachers. However, while students' perspectives informed my understanding of how inclusion is lived and felt, this dissertation's commitment to a structural approach means that the primary focus remains on the institutional and professional actors whose practices most directly shape the production of inclusion. This decision reflects my overarching aim of interrogating the systemic and structural production of dis/ability within inclusive education frameworks, where teachers occupy a particularly pivotal role.

In this way, the teachers' narratives and actions serve as the core of the empirical work presented in this dissertation. By focusing on their experiences and practices, I explore how inclusion is enacted in classrooms, how dis/ability is constructed and negotiated in everyday educational contexts, and how normative frameworks are sustained, resisted, or reimagined through teachers' work. This focus allows me to critically analyze the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency, which is central to the broader aim of interrogating the conditions that enable or hinder inclusive education.

4.4. Locating the field: time, place, and contextual dynamics

Before delving into the practicalities of the empirical component of my research, I would like to expand on the specific time and place of this exploration into inclusive education so as to provide a situated understanding of the study. This section introduces the Danish primary school system and the everyday realities of the class I followed, offering insight into how norms, practices, and relationships shape the enactment

of inclusion. By situating the study in this context, I aim to show how institutional structures and pedagogical practices intersect with dis/ability and inclusion, particularly during the formative years of primary schooling.

Primary school is an appropriate context for this research because it is a time and space where students' differences are particularly visible, both socially and academically (Stanek 2011). At this stage, children are still learning how to navigate the culture of schooling, including behavioral norms and expectations. As one teacher reflected:

> I have previously taught the older students, and it's much different with them. You don't see as much outwardly disruptive behavior, children running around and talking all the time.

During primary school, students' difficulties in conforming to normative expectations about behavior often remain outwardly pronounced, and the simultaneous emphasis on community-building and behavioral regulation makes this a particularly intense period for the negotiation of inclusion. Furthermore, in the Danish school system, students are assigned to a class of peers in kindergarten class (grade 0), which they ideally remain part of throughout their compulsory schooling. This creates a strong focus on building social cohesion and fostering a sense of community within the class. Typically, each class has one or two class teachers who carry the overarching responsibility for the students, including teaching core subjects, building relationships with families, and organizing parent-teacher communication. In the class I followed, Nanna (the Danish and English teacher) and Karl (the mathematics and science teacher) were the two class teachers.[3] The structural and pedagogical features of Danish primary schools provide a unique setting for studying inclusive practices. The emphasis on building cohesive class communities, combined with the intense focus on behavioral norms during primary school, creates a rich environment for examining how inclusion is enacted and negotiated.

Another important contextual factor was Covid-19. When I started my PhD project in February of 2021, Denmark was in its second lockdown

3 I mention their names here because, as gatekeepers and key figures with whom I formed relationships during my research, they feature prominently in my reflections throughout this chapter. While I reiterate that this study is not about them personally, their specific mention (via pseudonyms) is deserved and aids readability.

due to the pandemic. The first few months of my project coincided with a gradual reopening of society, with students beginning to return to schools across the country, albeit in incremental steps. Primary school students were the first to return to their classrooms after both lockdowns, which reflects the prioritization of younger children's needs for stability, in-person learning, and social interaction. Over the holiday break in December 2021, schools closed early once again due to rising infection rates, and mask requirements were periodically in place for adults and older students, including during the early stages of my fieldwork. Denmark ended most restrictions, including mask mandates, in February 2022.

The effects of these lockdowns on students' friendships, well-being, academic achievement, and general class community-building are still being explored (e.g., Qvortrup 2024; Qvortrup and Lykkegaard 2024). Research suggests that the sudden shift to online schooling and the subsequent return to physical classrooms were experienced differently across student groups. Some students, particularly those in vulnerable positions, faced challenges in transitioning between home and school environments (Qvortrup et al., 2020). At the same time, studies have highlighted the fact that online schooling had unexpectedly positive effects for certain groups of students, such as those diagnosed with social anxiety or ADHD, who reported a sense of relief from the pressures of in-person schooling (Szulevics 2021). What is clear, however, is that the abrupt lockdowns and the ongoing shifts between online, hybrid, and in-person schooling required significant effort and adjustment for both school professionals and students. This context inevitably shaped the environment in which my fieldwork was conducted, as teachers and students alike were navigating the aftermath of these disruptions.

4.5. Negotiating access: challenges and considerations

The lasting impact of Covid-19 lockdowns was noticeable when I began negotiating access to schools in the fall of 2021. Many schools and municipalities emphasized that their priority was "getting back to normal," and they expressed concerns that having a researcher present might disrupt this process. Schools were working hard to address issues that had emerged in the slipstream of lockdown, including reigniting projects and initiatives that had been put on hold.

Another key factor in negotiating access concerned the theme of inclusion itself. As Poulsen (2017) notes, the term "inclusion," used to denote inclusive education in a Danish context, has come to carry negative associations among school staff, leading her to avoid using it when negotiating access to case schools for her dissertation. Instead, she framed her project as being about "participation" and "classroom communities," which helped mitigate resistance to the terminology while still conveying her research focus. Similarly, in my interviews with teachers and principals, the avoidance of the term "inclusion" emerged as a recurring theme. One teacher, who also worked as an inclusion facilitator,[4] explained:

> We don't use the term inclusion at all at the school when talking with teachers in meetings. It's called 'creating opportunities for participation'. That inclusion word is just, ugh, it's so worn out. And to avoid any really negative associations among people, right? That's why it's called creating opportunities for participation for as many children as possible in the class community.

When I was contacting schools and pitching my research project to them, I did not yet fully appreciate how negatively the term "inclusion" was perceived in practice. I used the term generously and emphasized the importance of case studies exploring the specific, local conditions for creating more inclusive environments. I also highlighted the value of perspectives from practitioners who enact inclusive education on the ground. However, it took me a year to find a school that would welcome me for the ethnographic part of the study. Other PhD projects in Denmark have reported similar difficulties. In addition to Covid-19-related issues, researchers have pointed to teachers' increased workloads as a key factor (e.g., Hedegaard, 2024; Yang, 2021). However, during my time working on this project, I came to view the process of negotiating access as part of knowledge production, as the ambivalence and resistance I met among gatekeepers mirrored the attitudes and affects about inclusive education that I encountered once my empirical study formally started.

To navigate these challenges, I decided to prioritize interviews as an initial strategy. This allowed me to begin gathering insights while also building

4 The title "inklusionsvejleder" [literally: inclusion supervisor or instructor], refers to a teacher who has specialized training or experience and supports their colleagues in creating inclusive learning environments.

relationships and connections that could potentially lead to fieldwork opportunities. I asked all participating school leaders about the possibility of conducting ethnographic studies at their schools. While most expressed interest, only one ultimately agreed. This approach reflects the reality of conducting research in dynamic, post-Covid environments, where flexibility and responsiveness became essential attributes.

4.6. Interviews: capturing diverse perspectives

The first round of interviews was conducted with school leaders, with whom I got in contact partly through suggestions from my network, and partly by writing to or calling a school to present my project. The interviews with school leaders were semi-structured, focusing on recurring themes while allowing flexibility to follow the direction set by the participants (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). My overarching aim was to explore understandings of inclusive education: its role in their organization, the concrete measures they identified as "inclusive," and their experiences with these practices. To capture both conceptualizations and practical examples, I specifically asked for their accounts of difficulties and successes with inclusive education.

The process of interviewing teachers began later and started with the teachers of the class that I followed, as well as two additional teachers at the same school. However, as the project progressed, I sought to broaden the scope of my empirical material by speaking to teachers at other schools, aiming to capture a wider range of experiences and approaches to inclusive education. To recruit additional participants, I relied on school leaders to share information about the project with their staff and reached out to my professional network, securing interviews with teachers from different schools and contexts. Most interviews were conducted in person, allowing for a more direct and relational form of engagement. However, two interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to logistical constraints. While online interviews lacked some of the immediacy of face-to-face interaction, they offered a flexible alternative that allowed me to include voices that might otherwise have been inaccessible.

Approximately nine months after completing my fieldwork, I conducted a follow-up interview with the class teacher Nanna, during which I shared preliminary analytical thoughts and excerpts from my material. This

session, which might be considered a (non-visual) form of empirical double-loop (Staunæs and Kofoed, 2015), invited her reflections on my interpretations, testing the validity and recognizability of my representations of her, the students, and the situations we discussed. Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts—due to overlapping parental leaves—prevented a similar follow-up with Karl. Beyond enhancing validity, the follow-up interview with Nanna also contributed significantly to my reflexive engagement, offering new angles for analysis by thinking together with Nanna from our different perspectives about the classroom practice in which we had both been embedded.

Finally, I interviewed three municipal coordinators responsible for inclusive education initiatives. One interview was conducted as a pair session with two closely collaborating colleagues. Two others, conducted early in my PhD process, were unstructured and served more as an exchange of ideas about possible angles of inquiry. These interviews provided valuable insights from a strategic perspective, highlighting differences and similarities between schools as well as the inter-municipal level.

4.6.1. Interviews as reflexive spaces: drawing on observations

The teacher and municipal coordinator interviews followed an interview guideline similar to the one used with school leaders, while my interviews with teachers had a greater emphasis on classroom practices. As I embarked on my fieldwork, I let the interviews be more influenced by my experiences in the classroom, using the interviews partly as a reflexive space where my own interpretations could be contrasted or enriched. One episode in particular became a recurring reference point in the teacher interviews. This early observation stood out to me as a good example of how classroom norms are negotiated in specific situations. I presented it in the interviews as follows:

> In a primary school classroom with 23 students and two teachers, a process of establishing new class rules is underway. The teachers explain that today, the students will have the opportunity to provide input on what works well and what could be improved in terms of well-being in the class, and next week, they will collaboratively create the new class rules based on this

> input. After introducing the activity and their expectations, the teachers begin a plenary session. Students raise their hands to contribute, and one teacher writes their comments on a large paper while the other circles around, helping students wait their turn and remain in their seats. Early in the session, one student grows restless, fiddling with objects and talking to classmates. This student often gets distracted in class, particularly in plenary situations. The mobile teacher sits beside him briefly, which calms him, but when the teacher moves to assist his colleague, the student slips across the room and slides under the teacher's desk at the front corner of the classroom. Noticing this, the teacher approaches the student, and after a whispered exchange, allows him to remain under the desk for the rest of the activity.

Shortly after observing this situation, I presented it during a research exchange at Gothenburg University. My own initial interpretation saw it as an example of how the teachers actively renegotiated norms and rules following the disruption of dis/ability, adapting them to meet perceived student needs. However, the research group in Gothenburg challenged my thinking, raising alternative perspectives that questioned my assumptions. They asked about the didactical context, the use of visual aids, and the absence of certain supports—dimensions I had not initially considered. This encounter highlighted the multiplicity of interpretations and focal points inherent in the episode and underscored its potential as a site for reflexive engagement.

In response to the feedback I had received, I incorporated the example into my teacher interviews, framing it as an opportunity to explore how inclusion is understood in practice. I asked teachers to reflect on the recognizability of the situation, the motivations of both the student and the teacher, and then posed a seemingly straightforward follow-up question: *is this child included?* This question, though almost reductionist, served as a reflexive trigger, prompting teachers to articulate what criteria they believed must be fulfilled for a student to be considered included or includable. Using this concrete example made the interviews more dynamic, encouraging teachers to shift from recounting personal experiences to critically appraising someone else's practice.

4.6.2. Scenario-based interviews with students

The last decades have seen increasing criticism of how children and youth are portrayed and included in scientific research (Bodén 2021; Hedegaard 2024). These discussions have often centered on philosophical ideas that envision children as innocent and in need of extra protection and ethical caretaking. As I have stated above, my primary focus during the empirical phase of this project was on the teachers as the main enactors of the structural norms that (re)produce dis/ability in the classroom. That does not mean that I do not consider the students to be actors in their own right and an integral party of the inclusion equation. The diverse community of learners that inclusion envisions is after all a community of students. To more directly and explicitly involve the students' perspectives in the research process, I developed a specific group interview format. Their contributions enabled me to reflect on some issues that were puzzling me about the practice I had observed and provide more nuance to the dominant point of view of the teachers.

Out of 22 students present on the day of the interviews, 18 had brought the consent form signed by their parents and were therefore eligible to participate, which included being recorded.[5] In my introduction of the exercise, I made sure to describe what would be expected of the students and to tell them that if they preferred not to participate, or changed their minds in the middle, that was totally ok. They all wanted to participate. The teachers took nine students each into two different classrooms and performed the interviews in two rounds with a 15-minute break in between. The four students who could not participate due to lacking parental consent, stayed in their home classroom with me, and later went out to the break with the others. They were presented with the choice of reading or drawing. Out of a concern for them feeling left out, I also told them that they were welcome to see what the others were doing, which they all were interested in. They therefore read the scenarios and we talked about them, but I did not take notes on or record these conversations.

The interviews found a point of departure in two fictitious scenarios that I wrote for the occasion. They were loosely based on situations that I had observed, but I chose to place the events in a totally different setting to avoid it becoming a conversation about specific students in the class. The

5 The teachers speculated that the lack of consent was probably due to forgetfulness rather than active non-participation.

scenarios each addressed a specific theme of interest to me. The first scenario was set in the 1st grade of the Rainbow School and describes a teacher who is wrapped up in a long introduction to a grammar exercise. Albert, a student, starts playing with a ball under the table while the teacher is talking. The students were asked to consider what the teacher, the other students in the class and Albert himself should do in this situation, as well as reflect on why Albert was playing with the ball and what he was feeling. This scenario was meant to ignite discussions that reflected students' relationship to rule-breaking in the classroom as well as reprimands and disciplinary measures by the teacher.

The second scenario took place in the 3rd grade at Rainbow School during math class. Astrid has been given a computer and assigned to play Minecraft while the other students are working in their workbooks. With this scenario, I wanted to create room for the students' feelings about differential treatment, especially the kind that could be experienced as attractive to those who were not receiving it. Each scenario had follow-up question suggestions for the teachers, such as "why do you think this is happening?" and "what should the teacher/student/other students do in the situation?" etc. The second part of the session was an assignment to draw a picture of "a good lesson" where it "felt really good to be in the class." Examples included "a lesson where you felt really good at something and where the subject was really interesting to you," and "where there was a great atmosphere in the classroom." The teachers were encouraged to ask the students about their drawings, so that the recordings included some of their thoughts and reasonings.

I had discussed the scenarios with Nanna and Karl beforehand in order to get their input on the relatability and clarity of the scenarios with an eye to presenting them to the students. We had also decided that they were to be in charge of conducting the interviews, using a sheet that I had prepared containing the scenarios and examples of follow up questions. The decision was based on considerations concerning the power-balance between me and the students, and my concern that this would inhibit some of the students from sharing during the conversation, especially those with whom I had never spoken one-on-one. With their teachers doing the interviews they were all in a situation that looked more like their everyday situations. I wanted the students to feel relaxed and safe to engage in the discussions and deemed that to be more likely with their teachers than with me. However, even though Danish students do not receive grades at

this age, there is obviously also much at stake in the teacher-student relationship that could have implications for how the conversations took shape. Listening to the tapes afterward I heard an echo of the day-to-day interactions between them, full of instructions, reprimands, and acknowledgments. The same students who were most visible in the classroom normally were also the most dominant in these conversations.

To conclude this section on interviews, I have made an overview of the number of interviews and their distribution between groups:

School leaders	Teachers	Municipal coordinators	Student group interviews
8	9	3	2

4.7. Ethnography: a situated exploration

Inspired by Jeffrey and Troman (2004), I refer to my work as an intermittent ethnography, meaning that rather than having one long intensive period of fieldwork, my interactions in the field were interspersed over time. As noted, inclusion is a situated dynamic process that manifests itself in diverse ways in different, contextually determined moments. By engaging in repeated visits during the school year, I gained both embodied experience of classroom life and a broader understanding of the situated and contingent character of inclusion. As described by Staunæs (2004), the everyday lives of both researcher and participants are co-determining for how an ethnographic endeavor can unfold. Even if they were incredibly welcoming, the teachers that I followed had things to do that did not involve me. And, similarly, I had other PhD commitments to deal with, not to mention the appointments, sick days, and day-to-day routines of being a parent. An intermittent ethnography aligns with the rhythms of all the participants – including the researcher – and does not involve the same change in routines that a more intensive engagement naturally does.

Furthermore, being in an on-and-off relationship with the subjects in the field had its advantages. Each pause allowed me to reflect on previous observations and refine my focus, bringing a fresh perspective to the evolving classroom dynamics (Jeffrey and Troman 2004). Shifting

between being in the field and not also made it obvious how inclusive strategies in the classroom were dynamic, changing their nature as well as direction during that year. The table below shows in which months of the school year I visited the class. Some months I was only there for one day, for example in June 2022, and in other months I visited several times a week. All in all, I was at the school for 30 days, counting approximately 120 hours of observations.

Jun. 2022	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	Jun. 2023

4.7.1. Introduction to the field

I interviewed the principal of the school in the spring of 2022, and when I asked about the possibility of undertaking a more in-depth study, she immediately sprang into action and suggested some practical possibilities. In her own words, she welcomed the "constructive disruption" that ethnographic research could pose, positioning my presence as a positive thing that could help them improve their practices. She ended up suggesting three classes for me to visit, one in each section – primary, middle, and lower secondary school, commenting that they all were regular classes, but each had some issues they were wrestling with. She also made the initial appointments with the teachers for one day toward the end of the spring semester. I do not know how my project was introduced to them initially, but all three teachers had said yes to me visiting them and observing during one lesson, and I explained more about myself and the project as we met. I introduced myself to the students upon entering the classrooms, which in both primary and middle school led to a myriad of hands in the air with questions like "do you like fishing," "can you speak Japanese" and the more-of-a-comment-than-a-question: "my sister/mother/cousin also works at/attends university!" In the 7th grade classroom, I was met with an active lack of interest from students, which seemed fitting for their age. In the primary school classroom, I met Karl and Nanna. Karl was already the class teacher while Nanna had just started and was getting to know the class before starting officially as their class teacher in the fall. Both teachers explicitly expressed interest in the project

and suggested that I come back and follow their work and their class. As this aligned with my research interests, I accepted, and we exchanged information so that I could contact them after the summer vacation. The class that I made observations in was thus not selected because of any particular characteristics among the students. The school is located in an affluent neighborhood with a majority white population with high socioeconomic status. Most of the students in the class lived close to the school, with a few coming from different parts of the city. The majority where white, native Danish speakers and without impairments.

Even though there was enthusiastic consent from the teachers, starting fieldwork with the school principal as my gatekeeper naturally created associations between my presence and the school leadership. This meant that my presence might be regarded as a form of surveillance or evaluation. I noticed how some teachers made jokes in the style of 'don't tell [principal's name] that I said that!' or sent me glances when things where not going as planned in the classroom. I understood this as an insecurity in terms of what I was thinking or documenting. This behavior was most pronounced with teachers I only saw occasionally, and not with Nanna and Karl. The class teachers did often ask about my perception and opinion on things that had played out in the classroom, but it took the form of a peer conversation rather than positioning me as a supervisor. In these conversations, I always answered truthfully to my experience, while refraining from providing in-depth analysis or judgment. I also emphasized repeatedly that even though I was observing them, it was the broader conditions for inclusive education that interested me, rather than any one specific action or statement they made. In that way it was not an evaluation of their specific practices. I also made it clear that I was the only one with access to all of the empirical material that was constructed during my time at the school.

4.7.2. Observing inclusion: strategies for ethnographic focus

During my visits with the primary school class, I made unstructured observations building on my broad understanding of inclusive education. As suggested in previous chapters, inclusive education is by no means an easy concept to pin down as it involved multiple elements, priorities, and agendas. Haug (2010, 203) notes that ethnography involving inclusive education is further complicated by the fact that it as a phenomenon cannot be directly observed in a classroom – rather it "must be

summarized from thick observational descriptions and thorough analysis that can be broken down into smaller units." Approaching it in the field has therefore been a question of trying to operationalize inclusive education into smaller parts while still observing broadly with a holistic scope.

I agree with Haug's (2010) point that inclusion is a difficult phenomenon to pinpoint empirically, and that all aspects of inclusion are not observable directly. However, I would also argue that inclusive *intent* sometimes can be observed directly. I had my gaze directed toward how teachers worked to create an inclusive environment, which is a constant negotiation between teaching methods, material conditions, organizational structures, and the students' modes of participation. Hence the need for a broad approach that incorporates as many of these factors as possible. But in specific instances where there had been a clear-cut act of exclusion, for example, if a student had been sent out of the classroom on a break due to interruptive behavior, their re-integration into the classroom became a very visible and observable process. Consider the following example from my fieldnotes, where Aksel has been sent out to sit in with a different class because he was seen as too interruptive:

> The students continue working with the English text in plenary form. Nanna is asking who wants to read aloud and posing follow up questions to the class about the content. After about 20 minutes, Aksel comes back from the other class. He looks around the classroom, where the students are currently immersed in the exercise. Instead of going back to his seat in the middle of the room, he sits himself on a countertop beside the sink by the wall closest to the door and is quiet, seemingly gauging what they are doing. Nanna does not acknowledge his presence, even though I am sure she has seen him come in. After a couple of minutes, he raises his hand to read a sentence aloud. Nanna calls his name, and he reads the sentence and translates it correctly. She praises him and says: 'why don't you take the next sentence also?' His face lights up, he sits up straighter and smiles before continuing to read the next one too.

In this example, preceded by an active exclusion of Aksel based on his failure to live up to Nanna's behavioral expectations, Nanna employs a subtle but effective strategy to invite him back into the classroom

community. She uses her knowledge of Aksel's English skills actively to create a moment of recognition that allows Aksel to leave his excluded position and re-enter the community as a valuable member. These strategies were often used by teachers when there had been a conflict with a specific student, and they changed depending on the student's needs. With Aksel, the academic content was a good way of bringing him in, because he was a very able student academically. With others, the relationship with the teacher and/or community was re-established in other ways to communicate how they were welcome even if they had transgressed the normative expectations. The example above represents a visible form that inclusion can take, and only demonstrates a very specific negotiation of one individual's reentry into an academic community. I would argue that such examples are valuable because they demonstrate what inclusion work in action can look like at the micro-level, while underlining the point that single instances like this one do not in themselves constitute inclusive education. Rather, inclusive education is a constant work in progress of creating an inviting environment that takes student's differences into account through the constant renegotiation of these moments.

To capture inclusive education in a broader perspective, I shifted my gaze between foregrounding teachers' work with groups of students, the whole class, and single individuals. Channeling my reflexive commitment, I tried actively to notice patterns in my notetaking and challenge them by doing something differently and paying attention to something different. The intermittent nature of the fieldwork was helpful in this regard, as I had time between visits to read and reflect on my notes and come up with new strategies. In Article 1, I explain how the process of collaborative reflexivity with my Swedish colleague aided in finding nuanced ways of directing my gaze in the classroom. The article also describes in greater depth the pitfalls of the specific intersection of ethnography and inclusive education.

I took notes both in the classroom and during breaks between classes. I tried to write in a way that did not seem too related to specific events in the classroom, often writing only key words or phrases at times when I was more visible to the teachers and students, and longer texts at times where their focus was clearly directed toward some task. If asked by the students what I was writing about, which happened a couple of times, I always answered truthfully, but in broad terms, e.g. "I'm writing about

what you did in class today and what Nanna said when you started, and what you were all doing."

4.7.3. Building relationships

> We go outside for a small break in the middle of the lesson block. I stand together with Nanna, looking at the children playing in the snow. Karl is throwing snowballs at the children, and they squeal and laugh and run around us. He comes up to stand beside us and with a contented sigh, smiles and says: 'Snowy days are such a great way to get your frustrations out with the kids. I just want to…'. He mimics rubbing snow in someone's face. Nanna and I laugh. 'Do you want me to quote you on that? I say. Nanna laughs and says: 'Wow Ida, sometimes I forget why you are here'.

I have previously referred to my fieldwork as "following" the teachers, which is essentially what I did. I arrived at the school in the morning, often heading directly to the classroom with the students, and observed how teachers facilitated inclusion and exclusion processes through their teaching and routines. During recess, I accompanied the teachers to the teacher's lounge and returned to the classroom afterward. Some subjects were taught by teachers other than the two class teachers, Nanna and Karl. In these cases, I stayed with the class. However, the majority of my observations were conducted with Nanna or Karl.

Although they had consented to my presence at the start of the fieldwork, I renegotiated access weekly, contacting them in advance to confirm if it was okay for me to visit. When other teachers were involved, I always sought their consent directly before entering the classroom, even though Nanna or Karl had occasionally facilitated this on my behalf. This renegotiation process was important to ensure that all teachers felt comfortable with my presence and had the freedom to decline if needed. They never did.

When I first started my fieldwork at the school, it became clear that both Nanna and Karl were no strangers to academic research, as they had both completed a master's degree at the university. The very first day of my engagement at the school, Karl used his own experiences with observation during the work with his master's thesis to explain why he was not intimidated to have a researcher observing his classes. They both seemed

very relaxed in my presence, which is also exemplified by the quote given at the outset of this chapter. However, that quote also illustrates the importance of re-iterating the specific researcher role continuously when engaging in longer-term field relationships. As argued by Clark and Sharf (2007), the relationship and the empirical production that is afforded by that relationship is the researcher's ethical responsibility, as they are the only one with full knowledge of the research context and possible implications.

Ellis (2007) highlights how personal relationships formed during fieldwork can shape both data production and communication, advocating a relational ethics that values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched. As a researcher uses themselves as an instrument for data production, affective attachments are inevitable, making ideals of complete detachment from the object of study impossible (Gulløv and Højlund, 2003). These affective entanglements, while unavoidable, can also be productive (Galløe, 2021).

I quickly developed a rapport with Nanna and Karl, as we were of similar age and had children of similar ages. In our conversations it became clear that we shared many values and perspectives, which led to a friendly and close identification with them. While Clark and Sharf (2007) argue that such field relationships can blur the boundaries between the personal and professional, making it difficult to fully distinguish oneself as a researcher, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) caution that an "over-rapport" may compromise analytical distance. However, I was not particularly concerned with over-rapport during my time at the school. I approached my relationships with the teachers as I would in any workplace, letting connections develop naturally without imposing a rigid, positivist notion of a distanced researcher. This openness felt appropriate given that I was not studying the class teachers as individuals, nor was I evaluating their specific approaches to inclusion. Instead, their roles, routines, and interactions with students offered insight into the broader normative frameworks shaping inclusive education. Free-flowing conversations about their professional experiences, personal motivations, and working conditions only deepened my understanding of the complex factors—both personal and institutional—that influence teachers' engagement with inclusive education.

While I did not view my rapport with Nanna and Karl as a threat to analytical distance, I remained committed to expanding and enriching my analysis through reflexivity. This was not a quest for objectivity, but an effort to step in and out of different perspectives and produce more layered and complex narratives. First, I regularly shared anonymized reflections and situations from my material during conversations, seminars, and presentations with supervisors and colleagues. Their feedback challenged dominant interpretations that I had formed, offering alternative perspectives that disrupted my initial assumptions. As described in Article 1, I extended this practice further through "collaborative reflexivity" with a fellow PhD student. Through the comparison and discussion of our classroom experiences of researching similar topics, this collaboration expanded my thinking and highlighted dynamics I might otherwise have overlooked.

Second, interactions with theory and previous research became vital tools for reflexivity. Engaging deeply with theoretical perspectives helped me disrupt biases, redirect my thinking, and approach the material from multiple conceptual angles.

Finally, the passage of time since my fieldwork naturally created distance and perspective. Writing the analytical sections of my dissertation after stepping away from the field allowed my impressions to mature, and my interpretations indeed evolved over time. Reflective writing, particularly in Article 1, further sharpened my awareness of how my relationships shaped my analysis while ensuring they did not constrain it.

Through these strategies—collaborative reflexivity, theoretical engagement, and the passage of time—I developed a multi-perspective lens that enhanced the complexity and depth of my interpretations. This reflexive process allowed me to situate my analysis as both co-constructed by my relationships and enriched by stepping beyond them (cf. Alvesson et al. 2008).

4.7.4. Positioning the researcher: reflections on roles and responsibilities

Developments in qualitative research over the last couple of decades have seen reflexivity and positionality become expected terminology, accentuating the break with a positivist tradition of a "god perspective" and ideals of objectivity (Berger: 2015; Haraway 1988). Building on these

developments, I refrain from viewing my position in either-or terms, instead imagining a multifaceted, dynamic and interactive process of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990). As the researcher, I am only part of the positioning process, with the research context and participants actively co-constructing the positions that become available to me (Justenborg and Nilsson 2022). With this understanding in mind, I wish to use this section to reflect on some of the positions I held during my fieldwork as well as on their epistemological implications.

During my fieldwork, I navigated various roles to better understand the teachers, students, and everyday practices of the classroom. Initially, I aimed to adopt a position where I was present but not obtrusive—not quite a fly-on-the-wall, but certainly more passive and inconspicuous than actively involved. Above all, I wanted to avoid being perceived as a teacher, as I felt that such a perception would quickly entangle me in maintaining order and enforcing classroom norms. I am not a trained teacher, and as I moved to Denmark from Sweden as an adult, I have limited experience with Danish schools from the inside. I was therefore unsure of the specificities of what constituted acceptable behavior and needed time to observe these norms from an outsider's perspective. I also believed that taking on the role of an enforcer of norms would hinder my ability to critically examine them. It would furthermore inevitably influence how students interacted with me. However, this position—the "almost-fly-on-the-wall"— quickly proved to be unstable.

A few weeks into my fieldwork, a situation arose while I was the only adult present in a specific area of the schoolyard during recess. It was a situation involving a group of boys from the class. I saw what happened, but initially had no intention of getting involved. However, one boy was left visibly upset and approached me to tell me what had happened, leaving an unspoken question hanging in the air: "Will you do something about it?" I hesitated. Kofoed and Staunæs (2015) argue that a researcher's uncertainty about "the right thing to do" in such situations is a critical aspect of fieldwork, one that allows for reflection and an exploration of situated norms. Therefore, they suggest, the researcher should allow for "ethical hesitancy," where the urge to intervene is critically examined. In this case, despite my efforts to avoid situations where I might become an enforcer of norms, I found myself to be the sole adult confronted with a boy who clearly needed help resolving a conflict. After what felt like an extended hesitation as the boy's gaze remained fixed on me (but likely actually lasting

only a couple of minutes), I decided that addressing the boy's immediate needs outweighed maintaining my research position. I approached the boys responsible for the offense, facilitated an apology, and watched as they resumed playing. In my fieldnotes that day, after describing the situation, I wrote:

> I think about how I'm just an adult here for them, and how an adult in a schoolyard means authority, conflict resolution, and a helping hand. It's hard to only be an observer here. I regulate their behavior just by being present.

To the class teacher, Karl, one of the advantages of having me as an observer in their class was that I was another adult in the room. He mentioned this several times and indicated that he saw it as a mutual benefit that I was in the classroom with them. He also exemplified this view by acknowledging my presence through comments and questions during lessons, but also by assigning me tasks as if I were a resource teacher there to help. In this way, he actively negated any intention I might have had to go under the radar, and explicitly positioned me differently. On days with him I could count on being included in instructions like "ask me or Ida for help if you get stuck in the assignment" or "could you escort a group of kids to the schoolyard for a ten-minute break?" Even though this more active role initially made me a little uncomfortable, it did allow me to negotiate more dynamic roles in the classroom, where I was sometimes an active contributor helping students or allowing the teacher to divide the class into smaller differentiated groups, and at other times held a more passive position, only speaking when spoken to.

I also experimented further with the urge to intervene that Kofoed and Staunæs (2015) address. At times, I remained passive to a degree that seemed to astonish the students, who were accustomed to adults adopting an admonishing role when faced with obvious transgressions. In one such situation, Nanna had to leave the classroom to assist a temporary teacher in the adjacent room. While she was away, one boy gradually escalated his behavior, moving from testing the boundaries of acceptable conduct to clearly crossing them by playing with paper towels and water in ways that would undoubtedly not have been permitted had Nanna been present. As I stood there silently, observing the events unfold, the boy and several other students repeatedly glanced at me, their looks seemingly asking, "Are you really not going to do anything?" When Nanna returned, I became

acutely aware of how tense I had been, deeply conscious of how my passivity had challenged the expected behavior of an adult in such a situation.

In other situations, I took the opposite approach and actively interfered in practice. Not only did I walk around and talk to students about their work or help them, but also I made the teachers aware of things they had overlooked – a student withdrawing from their group because of some conflict, another having had their hand raised several times without being asked, or getting upset visibly but silently at some task they were not succeeding with. Intervening in this way made me reflect on my own latent ideas about a best practice, and how these related to my theoretical knowledge of inclusive education. It also took the form of mini experiments – "what would happen if teachers had time to notice x, y, or z earlier," or "what could having more professionals in the classroom mean for inclusion?" Thus, experimenting with different ways of positioning myself in the class provided different insights and perspectives that supported my overall aim of investigating inclusive education in Danish schools.

4.8. From field to findings: analytical approaches

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest, analysis in ethnography is not one separate stage of the work, rather it is an ongoing process that structures the whole period of fieldwork. The gaze of the researcher is always on something (Rosvall 2015), and that something is likely steered by current analytical interests. For me, the first analytical steps were taken as I moved between field and desk, continuously thinking, discussing, and comparing with both peers and the literature. It was an ongoing process of thinking with the data.

All the interviews as well as recordings from formal meetings and the intervention with students were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were written up as soon as possible after each day of observations. As I finished the production of my empirical material, a different phase of analysis started. After replacing all names with pseudonyms and removing some life-story details from a couple of the interviews, I uploaded all transcripts to Nvivo. In the coding process I was inspired by MacLure's (2013, 181) take on coding as an experiment of creating

order where it is considered "not as a static representation or translation of a world laid out before us on the operating table of analysis, but as an open-ended and ongoing practice of *making* sense." Throughout the process I therefore aimed to stay open to those bits of data that were in contradiction or refused to fit into the evolving narratives. I used these bits actively to explore and reimagine the constructions of meaning I was producing. My codes were initially loosely descriptive labels and developed to become renamed, expanded, or discarded throughout the process. For chapter 6, I focused on events of change, conceptualized as events where the school's norms, rules, or practices where bent, transcended, and morphed in the face of dis/ability. For chapter 7, I re-read the material focusing on moments of affective intensity, where affect was either described explicitly by participants or myself or implicitly present between the lines. The analytical strategy has thus shifted both between the two analytical chapters and during the work on each one, sometimes reading with theory, and other times foregrounding empirical cues and patterns.

4.9. Relational ethics in a formal practice: ensuring safety and dignity

As described above, my view of research ethics is relational (Ellis 2007), considering ethics as a processual, ongoing commitment rather than a fixed set of rules. This perspective positions the researcher as ultimately responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of participants and reflecting on the potential effects of their participation (Clark and Sharf 2007). Throughout the empirical production process for this dissertation, I encountered numerous ethical conflicts and made decisions informed by this commitment to relational ethics. Reflexivity has been a cornerstone of this process, occurring before, during, and after the production of empirical material. It reflects my ethical responsibility to critically and continuously assess the power dynamics, relationships, and implications of my research (Skeggs 2002).

Ktenidis (2024) notes that there is a culture of confession in dis/ability studies, where the researcher engages in reflexivity practices to specifically confess their dis/ability status. Such confessions are then used as a kind of currency, somehow increasing the value of the research due to the insider position it has been produced from. Within dis/ability studies, the

focus on lived experience of dis/ability could be seen as a push-back against the ableist, objectifying gazes historically dominant in research based on the medical model of dis/ability. From this resistance came the slogan "Nothing about us, without us," which served to highlight the need for new perspectives in dis/ability research (Goodley 2024).

I have chosen a perspective in which all subjects are set aside, instead centering on the (re)production of structures that shape work with inclusive education for all students in Danish schools. In this way, I have not honored the call of inclusivity in the research process. Moreover, I privilege the perspectives of teachers, in that their perspectives are the source of most of the empirical material. For some students with experiences of being dis/abled, teachers have been central actors in their disablement, complicit in perpetuating ableist structures. Such privileging might therefore come across as a reproduction of dominant voices. In doing this I have followed the developments in critical dis/ability studies that position this perspective as a methodology. Sami Schalk writes that: "One can study disabled people and not be doing critical disability studies and one can be doing critical disability studies and not be directly studying disabled people" (2017, 1). She furthermore details it as an "approach to studying power, privilege, and oppression of bodily and mental norms which is not dependent upon the presence of disabled people, yet is informed by social perspectives, practices, and concerns about disability" (2017, 2).

I have a strong ethical commitment to the emancipatory aims of dis/ability studies, and I would argue that my contributions, as put forward in this dissertation, align with those aims by providing new perspectives on how inclusive education is negotiated in practice and how it can become more transformative. I privilege teachers' experiences because they are the primary enactors of normative, ableist societal and school organization. In the classroom, teachers function as channels for both inclusive and disabling structures, which makes their practices and perspectives critical to understanding how inclusion and exclusion are enacted. To further complicate my narratives, I have relied on a network of readers, reviewers, supervisors, colleagues, and discussion partners from diverse positions to inform this research. The aim is therefore, in a larger lens, to contribute to a more inclusive school for all students.

Alongside these reflections, there are also formal aspects of research ethics that must be addressed here. All interview participants were informed about the project's focus areas, which I described as an exploration of the enactment of inclusion in practice and how schools respond to diverse student populations. Participants were explicitly informed about the intended use of the empirical material for academic articles and the dissertation. I sought their consent to record our conversations and transcribe them for these purposes. Additionally, I emphasized their right to ask questions at any time and to rescind their consent without consequences.

To protect participants' anonymity, I pseudonymized all data during the transcription process and deleted the key file linking real names and schools once transcription was complete. I also removed or altered any additional identifiable characteristics that could render participants recognizable.

When it came to student participants, I took extra care to ensure transparency and respect for their and their families' rights. Parents and/or caretakers were fully informed of the project's purpose, my contact information, and the details of how I intended to use the empirical material. Before conducting the group interviews, I provided a detailed explanation of their practicalities and sought explicit consent to record the sessions.

Throughout the project, I have stored all data securely, in compliance with current regulations. My approach to data handling adheres to the Danish Code of Conduct for Research (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2014) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This integration of relational ethics with formal research protocols has allowed me to conduct research responsibly, with the safety, agency, and dignity of participants at the forefront of the process.

4.10. Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the methodological framework and practices underpinning this dissertation, demonstrating how qualitative methods were employed to explore inclusive education as a dynamic and co-constructed phenomenon. Guided by a social constructivist approach within critical dis/ability studies, I used a combination of interviews and

ethnography to illuminate the processes shaping inclusion in a Danish primary school context. The methodological choices and reflections outlined here form the dissertation's commitment to exploring inclusion as a situated, multi-actor phenomenon shaped by structural, material, and affective forces. The upcoming three chapters are built around the three articles that are part of this dissertation. Chapter 5 continues the work in this chapter and contains the methodological article, while chapter 6 and 7 present the main findings of my study.

Chapter 5. A quest to see differently

This chapter contains the first article of the dissertation, titled "Seeing Differently in Inclusive Education: Ethnographic Pathways and Reflexive Practices". The article represents my efforts to take the premises of inclusive education seriously by avoiding methodological pitfalls that distort its structural emphasis into individualized representation. It reflects the critically reflexive ambitions of my theoretical framework, which emphasizes the need for researchers to interrogate taken-for-granted practices and invisible norms. Mirroring Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) call for reflexivity, this includes examining not only the researcher's own position and role vis á vis the participants but also the larger relationship with the methodological and theoretical dogmas of one's field.

Although critical dis/ability studies is not explicitly addressed in this article, its influence is present in the commitment to critical reflexivity and the examination of dis/ability as a socially produced phenomenon. The article aligns with Minich's (2016) perspective on critical dis/ability as a general approach, encompassing theory and methods, by embracing a reflexive approach that rethinks implicit norms and challenges ableist assumptions, both in research practices and in the broader field of inclusive education. It should therefore be read as a continuation of the reflexive work described in chapter 4.

Chapter 6. Beyond deficits: rethinking inclusive education

> T: We have a student in the class, and we've tried everything: a support teacher, noise-canceling headphones, pause cards, fidget spinners. But he just keeps talking. All the time. And he's often quite unaware of what's going on around him or of the expectations we have—he doesn't seem to hear what we're saying to him. You know you're supposed to avoid too much reprimanding, but what do you do when you're constantly being interrupted? We can't teach like this. The other children are also tired of him—they reprimand him too.
>
> I: Does he listen to that more?
>
> T: Yes, it usually works. But there's a stigma in it, he gets singled out, and no one feels good about it. The rest of the class finds him exhausting. He refuses to leave with the support teacher, and he won't sit with her in the classroom. What do you do?

The following chapter consists of the second article of this dissertation, entitled: "In search of a DisSchool: Deficit and Inclusion in Danish Schools." In this article, I explore how deficit-based and inclusive-oriented understandings of students' dis/ability to live up to normative expectations in school are constituted and enacted in practice. Many researchers have pointed to the persistence of deficit-based orientations in supposedly inclusive school settings and have observed how such orientations are still allowed to guide practice around what is referred to as inclusive work (e.g. Erevelles 2011; Hamre 2018; Tawell 2023). A deficit perspective is rooted in a medical model of dis/ability, and with the normalizing gaze of medicine construes deviance from expected norms as a deficit inherent in the persons themselves. The opposite of a deficit perspective is an understanding based on interactions with the context, a structural approach that sees the individual's actions in relation to their surroundings. As I described in chapter 3, critical dis/ability studies builds on a theoretical tradition that in many ways was formalized around the confrontation between individual and context represented in the social model of dis/ability. This makes the theoretical paradigm a useful tool

with which to explore this dynamic, a tool that serves to highlight the consequences as they play out in the everyday life of schooling.

One example is the quote at the top of this page. It comes from my fieldnotes and describes a conversation I had at the lunch table with a group of teachers. The teacher I was following had just introduced me and the topic of my study shortly before another teacher, whom I had not previously talked to, told me about this student in her class. At the time I heard her exasperation and noted the complexity of the situation she was describing, connecting it to a discourse noted by Slee (2013) about teachers not having the correct toolkit to handle the diversity of students in their classrooms. However, after writing the article you are about to read, I started thinking about this example in a new light. After all, the teacher describes "trying everything" with this student, but of all the examples she uses, none of them points toward the role of context in the unwanted behavior of her student. The measures listed are all individual, aimed at pacifying the student and correcting his tendency to talk over others. These measures all aim at steering his behavior toward conformity to the desired norm. However, allowing him to take more breaks, giving him something to fiddle with and removing the stimulus of listening to other students has no effect. I did not observe this classroom, and I do not know anything else about this student, which might mean that there were other measures put in motion that were not listed by the teacher in our conversation. I do, however, find the exchange to be a perfect example of an individual understanding of dis/ability in practice. In the "everything" the teacher mentions, teaching practices are not included, nor is there any mention of the material conditions of the classroom, time management, and social dynamics in the class. The teacher paints the student as oblivious to the stigmatic label to which his behavior leads. However, she still notes that he refuses to sit with the support teacher, which is an action that could be interpreted as part of a strategy to avoid stigma. The fact that this student has a support teacher assigned to him means that his behavior has been discussed at the highest level in the school, and that the explanation afforded by the teacher has been accepted there as well–the problem of his talking stems from a deficit in him, making him unable to understand and/or conform to the rules. Deborah Youdell (2006) has done extensive work on the subjectivation processes of students, specifically on how social categories of gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, ability come to co-determine the sort of learner that a student gets to be. As a result of this analytical work, she has introduced

the concept of the "impossible learner" to denote how some students become recognizable as unable to have educational success. The boy mentioned in this example comes to inhabit such a position, as he is not only unable to live up to the norms and expectations in the classroom but also refuses to accept any of the normalization measures that the school attempts. His dis/ability is therefore constituted as a deficit within him, rendering him impossible to include.

As is also clear from the example, this is not an issue that sits only with the individual teacher. In the quote, the teacher is also defining the conditions that they as teachers have to work with – other students who are kept waiting, constant interruptions threatening the expected academic pace, and fear of negative attitudes being formed toward the one student that is deviating from the norm. There is furthermore an expressed desire to adhere to the new norm for teachers of avoiding individually aimed reprimands when possible. To add to the context there are parental expectations on performance and well-being, regular tests and evaluations to prepare for, and 45-minute lesson blocks during which academic boxes should be getting ticked. Zooming out to include the ableist structures that provide the platform for deficit-based reasoning provides important cues about where the deficit should be placed instead. The conception of deficiency is not a matter of changing attitudes, even if attitudes do play a significant role in the individual teacher's critical reflection on their practice. Rather, deficiency-lenses become constructed through the collision of a myriad of normative expectations pertaining to the roles of students, teachers, and schools today.

The contribution of the article in this chapter lies in exemplifying how dis/ability-as-deficiency is constructed in schools, while also showcasing the inclusive rationales that exist and discussing what they can look like when allowed to guide practice. By illustrating how the concrete actions we undertake in practice contribute to such constructions, the analyzed empirical examples bring inclusion-work into a realm of possibility and frame it as being a matter of specific organizations and everyday choices rather than abstract theoretical ideals. In this way, my examples serve as bridges between theoretical ideation and practice.

Although without addressing it directly, this article hints at the focus of Article 3–the affective dimensions of inclusive education. This connection is evident in the rhetorical 'what do you do?' that concludes the quote

above, signaling the teacher's sense of powerlessness regarding this student. The connection to affect is also visible in the teacher's reflections on the student's vulnerable and stigmatized position and the guilt and empathy it generates. The article is followed by a short analytical epilogue, which continues to explore the inclusive potentialities present in current practices.

6.1. Epilogue: Crip perspectives on participation

In chapter 4, I mention an empirical example from my fieldnotes that became a fixture in my interviews with teachers as I was inspired by the way in which real-life examples can trigger reflections and evaluations that make underlying attitudes and norms visible. In the example, the two class teachers have initiated a process to negotiate new class rules, the first part of which consists of getting students' inputs on what works well and not so well in their class community. They organize the process as a plenary session, where one teacher writes students' comments on a large piece of paper at the front of the class while the other teacher moves around the classroom and helps students follow the rules of raising their hand before speaking and sitting on their chairs and so on. One of the boys in the class is struggling to abide by these rules and ends up sitting under the teacher's desk, obscured from view for the remainder of the session.

After retelling this situation, I asked the teachers: is he included? All of them said "yes." The teachers commented that they could recognize this situation from their own classroom experience and had similar experiences almost daily. As long as there was some kind of follow-up with the student, making sure he was not upset, then they saw no problem with this situation. A counterargument might be that this is an example of an understanding of inclusion-as-place, where as long as the boy remains in the classroom, he counts as "included," even though in reality he is de facto excluded from participating. Arguably, this judgment will depend on a number of contextual factors. For example, the teachers also noted that a teacher should preferably take time after class to acknowledge the student, ask what it was like under the table, what he had heard in terms of what was going on, and make sure that he was up to date with what the other students had said in the exercise. In the following analysis, I will, however, invite you to consider this as an example of a student who needed something different– and got it. One teacher elaborated on her perception of the situation as follows:

> You could say that we've decided that a classroom has to be like this—you sit on a chair with your feet on the floor, and maybe there's something going on up on the blackboard. That's the way we're used to it, the way we've learned, the way we've chosen to structure the space. But you could structure it in all sorts of other ways. It doesn't have to be that we all sit like that, and only one

> person speaks at a time, and we all have to listen to what everyone says—even if some of you might all say the same thing or even if we don't agree. That you're exposed to all kinds of stimuli, stimuli, stimuli, stimuli—it doesn't have to be like that.

In this quote the teacher highlights the need for adaptability of both spaces and practices to accommodate the diversity of needs in the classroom. From a critical dis/ability perspective, we could interpret this reasoning as an invocation of crip potentials in a classroom, the potential of doing differently that arises from a questioning of norms based on the able-bodied experience. Not everyone can engage in learning the same way, especially when the only sanctioned modes of participation are based on expectations of conformity to neurotypical standards. The example thereby comes to illustrate how normative expectations around participation—such as sitting still and listening to a plenary discussion—can disable students who have different needs in terms of engagement.

By saying "we've decided that a classroom should be like this," the teacher addresses the possibility of undoing the fixed understanding of what a classroom is and what should be going on inside its walls, while opening a space for asking if there are other possible choices we could make. If we no longer expect all students to participate in the same way at the same time, we open new possibilities for students whose ways of engaging are often dis/abled by the classroom's normative structures. Rather than forcing students to conform, this crip approach invites us to imagine classrooms where there is more than one acceptable way of participating, thus accommodating diverse needs and rhythms of learning. The norms and expectations embedded in classroom activities privilege certain bodies, behaviors, and learning processes while disabling others. For instance, the teacher's repetition of "stimuli, stimuli, stimuli" highlights the overwhelming sensory demands of the classroom environment, which can disable students with sensory processing needs. Cripping participation in a classroom involves recognizing that learning trajectories differ for all students—not only in terms of academic progress but also in navigating the social norms framed as classroom competencies. This approach calls for making all aspects of a task visible, and valuing effort and achievement across a spectrum of actions. For instance, answering a question correctly, sitting in a chair for more than ten minutes, or listening attentively to a conversation can all be recognized as meaningful accomplishments. Such recognition shifts the focus away from labeling a student as an "impossible

learner" and instead invites us to address the learning context itself as an "impossible situation" for some students. Rather than asking, "How can we get him to stay in his place?" a more transformative question might be, "How can we reimagine this session to better accommodate diverse student needs?"

Cripping participation also involves rethinking timelines—challenging the ableist assumption that all students should progress at the same pace or reach the same milestones at the same time (Ljuslinder, Ellis and Vikström 2020). Instead, this approach calls for a more flexible understanding of learning that honors diverse temporalities and allows students to engage with classroom practices on their own terms (Bierdz 2024). Through this lens, the boy under the table can be understood as participating in his own way, practicing conformity to behavioral norms for as long as he could that day. This does not mean that he will never learn to stay in his seat or that we should abandon efforts to support his engagement at another time. Rather it encourages us to ensure that alternative modes of participation remain open for those who have not yet mastered a skill. Viewing school as a place to practice, make mistakes, and try again calls for a broader commitment to inclusion—one that values learning in all its aspects. Such crip understandings of participation invite us to radically reconsider inclusive education as a narrative that challenges dominant models of schooling, which often reproduce ableist assumptions about what learning should look like. Inclusive education, by contrast, embraces a multiplicity of perspectives and allows them to shape classroom practices. This approach crips the classroom by rethinking and restructuring its design, pacing, and accepted modes of participation.

Chapter 7. Sticky emotions: affect, inclusion and the "inclusion-child"

In chapter 4, I discuss how affect became a key component of this project's theoretical framework, emerging as an empirical trigger during my time spent in the field. A specific situation from my fieldnotes illustrates this realization. It involved a conversation with Karl, one of the class teachers in the classroom I was observing. While we were discussing the logistics of my fieldwork in the teachers' lounge, two students entered, asking for the inclusion facilitator.

> Karl says that Anders isn't here anymore; he's left. One of the boys starts crying and runs away. Karl stands up and says to me that it's the inclusion facilitator who's gotten a new job. 'I just need to take care of him for a bit; I'll be back'. He goes out. Comes back and says, 'I'll be back in a moment, we just need to finish handling this, okay?' After 15 minutes, he's back again. He looks a bit tired. 'Transitions are hard', he says. 'They had an agreement with Anders about something from before summer break, that's why. It takes time to get the new one settled in, and Anders was just really good. It's a big loss. We called him, and he answered. So he got to say hello and goodbye to the boys. That helped a little.'

This situation foregrounds Karl's role in managing the emotional dimensions of inclusion, demonstrating a deliberate effort to address the students' distress. Rather than simply comforting the students or directing them to the new person occupying Anders' position, Karl facilitated emotional closure by contacting Anders, enabling the boys to say goodbye. This response acknowledged the students' emotional needs as valid and central to their sense of belonging, reflecting a key component of an inclusive environment. This moment prompted me to consider how emotions work to co-construct inclusive education practices. Over time, this affective dimension became a focal point in my analysis as I sought to reveal various ways emotions shape and sustain inclusion in the classroom.

The literature on affect describes two prominent strains of affect research, even though they are often blended, crossed, and combined in particular research ventures (Staunæs, Hvenegård-Lassen, Bissenbakker 2024). In

one of these strains, affect is positioned as a precognitive and prepersonal immanent force, affecting bodies' capacity to act. Affect as such does not concern what a specific subject feels but is instead an event that forces a kind of response (Dernikos et al. 2020). In the other strain, the words "affect," "feeling," and "emotion" are used synonymously, and affects are instead understood as both personal and social, circulating between these two, accumulating intensity (Staunæs, Hvenegård-Lassen and Bissenbakker 2024). This is, however, still an outside-in model of affect, where emotions do not reside in a subject and then get projected out; instead, subjects tap into already existing emotions as they circulate along with other objects in the social sphere (Ahmed 2014b).

There are thus several ways to go about the study of affect. Recent examples in a Danish context include Lotte Galløe (2021), who explores how norms for acceptable emotions are constructed in Danish schools. Blending Ahmed's affective apparatus with a Foucauldian concept of power, she discusses affective governance through an autoethnographic exploration of a pedagogical initiative to improve students' wellbeing. The main findings of her work concern the ways in which affective governing practices come to delineate acceptable subjectivities within the classroom through a process of affective stigmatization. In terms of moods and their relationship to inclusive and exclusive processes in schools, Dorthe Staunæs and Mante Vertelyté (2023) suggested that doing diversity and antiracist education in schools can be construed as "mood work." Building on Ahmed's (2014a) conception of moods these authors suggest that the reframing of diversity work as mood work has the potential to move the pedagogical focus from singular identities or the relationships between identities to sensory intensities as well. This perspective enables new orientations in anti-discriminatory education by examining how the flow and energy of moods—such as comfort, discomfort, joy, and pain—rise and fall. This perspective also allows us to examine how these dynamics can be pedagogically addressed.

In the following article, I likewise employ affect to approach the important move from individual identity to the construction of structural norms and communities. Leaning on Ahmed's conception of affective economies, I explore the emotions circulating within inclusive education with specific focus on the "inclusion-child," a "sticky" figure that becomes the site of intensified and nuanced emotional dynamics. The article departs from research that treats teacher attitudes and beliefs as individual traits.

Instead, I highlight how affects produced in a dynamic relation with the socio-material environment construct orientations leading away from and toward inclusive education. The figure of the inclusion-child is tied to contradictory emotions: frustration and fear construct it as burdensome, while pride and care frame it as full of potential. These affective dynamics reinforce an individualized, deficiency-based logic of inclusion, externalizing systemic challenges onto the "inclusion-child", a figure that comes to represent all children who challenge the conception of normalcy in schools today. Organizational constraints and emotional "stickiness" perpetuate this framing, disconnecting inclusion from educators' broader idea of their professional tasks. By applying an affective perspective, the article contributes a new way of understanding and approaching the challenges of translating inclusive education from idea to practice.

7.1. Epilogue: unpacking the "inclusion-child"

In the article, I examined the different emotions that stick to the figure of the "inclusion-child" as it circulates through the affective economy of inclusive education. In this brief epilogue, I would like to expand on how different iterations of the "inclusion-child"—as the symbolic representation of all children perceived as "problematic" in one way or another—are both produced by and productive of varying emotional constellations. As Ahmed (2014b) reminds us, emotions do not simply exist within individuals; rather, they circulate between bodies, spaces, and institutions, shaping orientations and attachments. The "inclusion-child," as an affective figure, becomes a site where emotional intensities accumulate and where broader anxieties about inclusion come to rest.

I argued that fear and guilt often adhere to the figure of the "inclusion-child": fear of failing these children and not being "good enough" as an educator, and guilt when there are insufficient time and resources to meet all students' needs. These emotions materialize and stick as teachers and students move through the classroom, forming relationships of proximity and distance that orient attention in particular ways. This dynamic invites a reflection on participation in the classroom as not merely an academic endeavor but as something deeply entangled with social and affective dynamics. Consider the following example from a teacher, which illustrates how these affects are distributed as she navigates the competing demands of her students in a chaotic classroom. The teacher reflects on how much of her energy is spent managing students who disrupt classroom norms—talking out of turn, not staying in their seats, and instigating conflicts—and how this focus inevitably leaves other students, like Aya, a quiet girl struggling academically, to be overlooked, and unsupported.

> Because we've been talking here about the same group of children, and while all that is happening, Aya is sitting there, completely clueless about what's going on, and I haven't had time to get to her and explain it. I have no idea if she's done what she's supposed to. Or, I assume she hasn't. But that's it. And it's just so damned frustrating. She's the one who loses in this situation. (...) And she's actually lonely and vulnerable in that class community too. (...) It comes back to the question of who falls through the cracks when there's so much chaos. Because

> it's not necessarily the ones causing the chaos. Well, sometimes it's them too. But it's also the ones with academic challenges who don't get any help at home. They're the ones who don't learn what they need to. (...) But then there are those like her (...) who might have undiagnosed dyslexia or ADHD or something that we just never get around to addressing. And I think there are probably a few like that in every class. And if you've got a well-functioning class, maybe those students get the help they need. At least, I hope they do. But honestly, it's just bad luck if you're in a class like this one.

Here, two distinct figures of the inclusion-child emerge and are positioned against one another: the "chaos-generators" and the "silently suffering." These figures highlight the multiplicity of the not-included position in the classroom and demonstrate how the "inclusion-child" is not a static figure but one that takes shape in relation to competing demands and expectations. Crucially, these divergent iterations of the "inclusion-child" also produce different emotional orientations. The "chaos-generators" become sticky with frustration, even resignation, as they demand the teacher's immediate attention and energy. In contrast, the "silently suffering inclusion-child", represented here by Aya, becomes sticky with guilt, empathy, and sadness. These emotions, as Ahmed (2014b) would suggest, do not simply reside within the teacher or the students but are shaped by the relational dynamics and systemic conditions that structure the classroom as an affective space.

This relational stickiness intensifies the affective economy of inclusion: the frustration directed at the "chaos-generators" becomes sharper in the presence of the guilt surrounding students like Aya. Similarly, the guilt associated with the overlooked students heightens the resentment felt toward those who consume the teacher's time and attention. In this way, the different iterations of the "inclusion-child" figure are not only positioned in opposition to one another, but also amplify the emotional tensions that circulate through the classroom.

In addition to these versions of the "inclusion-child," there are also the conforming students—those who live up to normative expectations of behavior and academic performance and therefore do not demand the teacher's immediate attention. They are the able, "normal" students in relation to whom the "inclusion-child" is positioned as a deviation.

However, as the following quote from another teacher illustrates, these students are also part of the affective economy of inclusive education, albeit in ways that reinscribe frustration and guilt onto the "inclusion-child":

> (...) You work really hard to support (...) those who are really struggling, and I think that's a good idea—it's important, and we should do that. But I also think it's frustrating that a talented boy like him isn't being challenged. Or that Liam and Thor have to sit and wait for ten minutes for the class to calm down. I mean, that's really unfair for them too. So I can see it from everyone's perspective, you know? (...) Like, how do you also accommodate them? So they feel like they're getting something out of the day. And not just sitting there listening to, well, grumpy teachers or others who are just fidgeting around doing all sorts of other things.

Here, the "good" students—those who behave and perform as expected—are described as being underserved by a classroom that unwillingly prioritizes attention to the children who are not living up to expectations. However, while the teacher's frustration appears to be directed at the failure to provide a challenge for these students, it ultimately sticks to the figure of the "inclusion-child," who is framed as taking time and resources away from able students. The affective economy becomes further saturated with guilt and frustration, and these emotions remain anchored to the figure of the "inclusion-child," whether they take the form of disruptors or silent strugglers.

What this analysis shows is how the "inclusion-child" operates as an affective "container" for broader systemic challenges. The child's symbolic role in the affective economy reflects anxieties about the limits of inclusion as an institutional project, the inadequacy of resources, and the impossibility of addressing every student's needs. As emotions stick to the "inclusion-child," they orient teachers toward particular groups of students and away from others, reinforcing their identification as problems. These emotional orientations do not just reflect individual feelings, but shape how inclusion is enacted and experienced in practice, producing uneven distributions of care, support, and frustration within the classroom. Critical dis/ability offers a framework for rethinking how emotions, expectations, and norms interact to shape the "inclusion-child."

The ideas of cripping participation put forward in chapter 6 could serve to redirect the frustration sticking to this figure toward other, less sticky objects in the affective economy, including the organizational structures, physical environments, and political frameworks that shape the possibilities for inclusive education in practice. When frustration is oriented toward these systemic factors rather than individual students and their symbolic representation, opportunities for transformative action emerge. By recognizing the structural and systemic roots of exclusion, the emotional burden can be dislodged from the "inclusion-child" and energy can instead be directed toward reimagining the conditions that enable or hinder inclusion. This shift not only reduces the emotional intensities attached to the inclusion-child but also fosters a broader commitment to addressing the barriers that impact all students.

The above analysis serves to further nuance and complicate the figure of the "inclusion-child" established in the article. Within the affective economy of inclusive education, different iterations of the inclusion-child, such as the "chaos-generator," and the "silent struggler," are produced, as are their relational counterparts, the students who are able to conform to behavioral norms and expectations. It thus becomes clear that the "inclusion-child" is not a singular or static figure. Rather, this categorical figure is co-constituted by the affective tensions, systemic constraints, and relational dynamics of inclusion, embodying multiple, sometimes contradictory, emotional investments.

Chapter 8. Concluding discussion

This chapter brings together the key findings and insights from the articles and chapters of this dissertation, weaving them into a cohesive narrative to reach a conclusion regarding its overall contributions. To that end, in what follows I take up the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of this work, paying attention in particular to the interconnected challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education. These challenges include the persistence of medical model thinking, which underpins the dominance of deficit-based approaches in teaching and school organization, as well as the affective dynamics that reinforce individualized frameworks in schools. The chapter begins with a synthesis of the findings from the three articles, each of which addresses different but interconnected aspects of inclusive education. Following this synthesis, the discussion situates these findings within the broader context of the Danish educational system, reflecting on recent developments such as the resurgence of special education practices and the introduction of middle forms. This chapter also critically engages with the limitations of the inquiry undertaken in this thesis and juxtaposes these limits with its positive contributions. The chapter concludes with a forward-looking perspective, arguing for continued critical engagement with the structural, relational, and affective dimensions of inclusive education.

8.1. A summary

In article 1, "Seeing Differently in Inclusive Education," my co-author and I explore the methodological challenges of studying inclusive education ethnographically, focusing on the risk of reinforcing deficit-based narratives. As the field has turned towards more practice-based explorations of inclusive education, ethnographic research could be a core strategy for addressing the question of how inclusive education might be brought to life in schools today. However, as Haug (2010) argues, micro-oriented studies that focus on classroom interactions can come to individualize inclusion by overemphasizing teacher-student interactions and focusing on individual students' behavior. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Danish and Swedish primary schools, the article explores how such dynamics played out in our fieldwork, using collaborative reflexivity as both a method and an analytical lens. Collaborative reflexivity involves a dialogic process in which researchers challenge their own

assumptions and interpretations by juxtaposing their fieldwork data and perspectives. The findings emphasize the importance of reflexivity in inclusive education, especially in terms of remaining critical toward dominant discussions in one's field so as to avoid reductionist representations. The article advocates a shift from a focus on inclusion of specific individual students toward a focus on classroom norms and systemic conditions that create exclusion in the first place. We highlight how ethnography can be a useful approach in this regard because it contributes a critical approach to inclusive education research, aligning it more closely with the transformative goals of the field.

In the second article, "In Search of a DisSchool: Deficit and Inclusion" I investigate how deficit-based and inclusive practices coexist and are enacted within Danish schools. The article demonstrates how dis/ability disrupts ableist norms and practices in schools, provoking change in practices. Central to the analysis is the contrast between deficiency-oriented approaches, which focus on compensating for perceived individual shortcomings, and inclusive rationales, which emphasize adapting structural and environmental factors to support all learners. The article leans on the concept "DisSchool" that was coined by Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2015), to describe moments when disruptions caused by dis/ability provoke schools to reorganize in a way that challenges ableist practices. These moments, while often fleeting, point to the transformative potential of inclusive education when schools adopt contextual, structural approaches rather than individualizing the responsibility for difference. By situating these practices within the broader context of Danish educational reforms and critical dis/ability studies, the article calls attention to the persistence of medical model thinking in education. It argues that recognizing the friction between deficiency-based and inclusive practices is crucial for moving toward more genuinely inclusive schools.

In an epilogue, I build on the analysis presented in the article while developing its argument from a crip-studies perspective. With this perspective I take a deep dive into how the norms around classroom behavior (e.g., sitting still, raising hands) and sensory environments privilege neurotypical students while dis/abling others. These norms shape who becomes recognizable as a successful or "impossible learner," in Youdell's (2006) terminology. Often these norms end up marginalizing students who cannot conform. Cripping participation in a classroom is a

challenge to these norms and a disruption of rigid expectations regarding how to be a good learner in a classroom. I reflect on this disabling impact while arguing for schools becoming places for practice, experimentation, and growth, rather than places that only aim at enforcing uniform standards of success.

In my third article, "Caught in a Bad Mood: The Affective Economy of Inclusive Education," I examine the emotional dimensions of inclusive education through the lens of affect theory, with a particular focus being placed on the figure of the "inclusion-child" as a symbolic site of tension and contradiction. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies, the article analyzes how emotions circulate and stick to certain figures and concepts, shaping orientations toward inclusion in practice. The "inclusion-child" is framed as a sticky figure that embodies the systemic contradictions of inclusive education. These emotional attachments produce guilt or frustration among teachers, affects that are shaped by systemic constraints such as limited time, resources, and institutional pressures. However, the analysis demonstrates how these emotions seem to stick to the children most closely associated with the "inclusion-child" rather than to these structural factors, which in turn reinforces individualized approaches to inclusive education. The article contends that inclusive education is entangled in a "bad mood," co-produced by skepticism, resource limitations, and systemic contradictions. Acknowledging and addressing emotional dynamics is essential to shaking this bad mood and creating more inclusive learning environments for all children.

In an epilogue to the third article, I further explore the figure of the "inclusion-child," examining its multiple, affectively produced iterations. This analysis reveals how emotions co-constitute different versions of the "inclusion-child". I examine how these iterations intensify through their interplay and orient educators differently toward these figures. For example, the frustration directed at "chaos-generators" amplifies in the presence of guilt toward "silent-strugglers," creating a feedback loop that reinforces deficit-based logics.

8.2. Weaving it all together

This dissertation identifies and addresses three interconnected challenges in the pursuit of inclusive education: the persistence of medical model

thinking, the dominance of deficit-based practices, and the affective dynamics that reinforce these individualizing approaches. By examining these challenges through structural, relational, and affective lenses, it contributes to a productive understanding of how inclusion operates in schools today.

8.2.1. Re-emphasizing the foundations of inclusion

Despite decades of advocacy in support of inclusive education, the logic of the medical model remains deeply embedded in educational systems. This model conceptualizes dis/ability as an individual problem to be corrected. Rather than adapting the structures around students, interventions are framed as compensatory measures that aim to normalize students. This way of thinking perpetuates exclusionary practices under the guise of inclusion, as is evident in such measures as segregated middle-form provisions, which may alleviate immediate challenges but fails to question the ableist assumptions underpinning mainstream classroom norms.

The persistence of the medical model not only shapes educational practice but also infiltrates research methodologies. Without careful reflexivity, well-intentioned studies risk reinforcing deficit-based narratives by focusing narrowly on individual behaviors or teacher-student interactions. Such reinforcement may be most common in quantitative studies, which are often designed around tick-the-box definitions that privilege place-based understandings of inclusive education. This tendency is also evident in the large body of attitudinal research, much of which employs quantitative methods to assess beliefs and perspectives on inclusion, as discussed throughout this dissertation. Such research individualizes inclusion by tying it to personal attributes and experiences rather than organizational, structural, and societal conditions. This dissertation calls for a shift in both research and practice—namely, a shift toward structural approaches that interrogate how systemic norms and material conditions contribute to exclusion.

8.2.2. Deficit-based practices and the logics of individualization

Deficit-based approaches continue to be part of schools' responses to difference. These logics frame students' challenges as personal shortcomings, positioning the role of schools as one of management and mitigation rather than adaptation. These approaches are upheld by norms

that are deeply embedded in schools. Such norms are based on ableist expectations that privilege certain bodies, behaviors, and ways of learning. Crip theory, as one of the strongest norm-critical perspectives within critical dis/ability studies, offers a vital lens for disrupting these entrenched norms and reimagining the possibilities of inclusion. Crip theory invites us to critically interrogate the ableist assumptions that govern educational environments, such as the expectation that all students should progress at the same pace, conform to neurotypical standards of behavior, and achieve the same milestones within timelines based on able-bodied performance. These norms dis/able students who engage with learning differently; it frames these students as problems to be fixed rather than as individuals whose diverse needs and capacities should be acknowledged in school.

From a crip perspective, inclusion involves rethinking the very design of educational spaces and practices in order to embrace multiple modes of participation. This approach challenges the idea that sitting still, raising hands, or processing auditory information in busy environments should define desirable classroom engagement. Instead, it asks what classrooms would look like if they were designed to accommodate a range of sensory, cognitive, and physical needs. How can schools create environments where diversity is integral to learning rather than an exception to be managed? Moreover, crip theory disrupts the linearity of educational timelines. It reframes learning as a practice of growth and experimentation, both academically and in terms of behavioral norms. This encourages schools to make it possible for students to engage with tasks on their own rhythms and timelines. Learning should be perceived from a more holistic perspective. For instance, a student who for a brief period deviates from a behavioral norm might be seen not as someone who fails to conform, but as someone who participates in their own way or on their own terms. This perspective positions schools as spaces where mistakes, flexibility, and ongoing adaptation are integral to learning, as opposed to being institutions enforcing uniform standards of success.

Such an approach may sound visionary and overly idealistic. Yet, even within ableist systems, moments of inclusive potential emerge—instances where educators reimagine classroom norms, question standards, or collaboratively develop strategies that distribute responsibility. These moments offer powerful glimpses of what education could become when it prioritizes adaptability, relationality, and shared accountability. They

reveal that structural change, while challenging, is not only badly needed, but is also achievable when educators and schools critically confront normative assumptions and the exclusionary practices they sustain. This dissertation has conceptualized inclusive education as an iterative and unfinishable process—a constant striving toward greater inclusion. As Hedegaard-Sørensen and Hamre (2024) remind us, full inclusion for every student, at every moment, is an unattainable ideal. Exclusion will always be a part of schools and society. Yet, the goal is not perfection; it is progress. It is about ensuring that inclusion happens more often, for more students, and in ways that genuinely transform educational spaces. For some students, this might mean experiencing inclusion for the very first time.

The perspectives from critical dis/ability studies woven throughout this work are essential tools in accelerating this process. These frameworks help us interrogate and disrupt taken-for-granted, ableist practices that often go unnoticed but profoundly shape educational environments. By challenging narrow conceptions of normality, they invite us to expand our understanding of what learning, participation, and success can look like. Crip theory, in particular, emphasizes the need to embrace multiplicity and fluidity, encouraging educators to design environments that honor diverse bodies, minds, and temporalities.

Furthermore, the affective dimension highlights how deficit-based and individualized perspectives are shaped by a complex interplay of subjects, material conditions, and emotionally charged relationships. Inclusion is not only a structural or relational challenge; it is also deeply affective. Emotions play a central role in shaping how educators and institutions orient themselves toward inclusion. The figure of the "inclusion-child" becomes an affective focal point, embodying the contradictions and tensions of inclusive education. Frustration, fear, and guilt stick to this figure, constructing it as burdensome and as reinforcing deficit-based logics. These emotions orient attention and action in ways that reproduce exclusionary practices, even within efforts nominally aimed at inclusion. At the same time, moments of care and pride disrupt these emotional attachments, pointing toward more inclusive orientations. These counter-narratives suggest that emotions are not merely obstacles but also opportunities. Understanding inclusive education through the lens of affect reveals it as more than a neutral policy framework that is failing. The emotional dynamics of inclusive education do not simply reflect

challenges—they actively co-construct inclusive education as both an idea and a practice. An affective perspective reframes inclusion not as a straightforward policy goal but as a deeply emotional, dynamic process that disrupts entrenched norms and expectations. Such a reframing of inclusion underscores the profound challenge that inclusive education poses to the status quo of teaching, teacher roles, and the organization, culture, and financing of schools.

Inclusion is not failing; it is difficult. It requires ongoing negotiation of competing demands, orientations, and systemic conditions, all infused with emotional complexity. Rather than a static endpoint, inclusion is a dynamic, iterative process that evolves with every interaction, decision, and adaptation. This dissertation critiques the current state of inclusive education while highlighting its transformative potential. Inclusion is not merely about accommodating difference within existing structures; it demands a reimagining of norms, roles, and relationships in schools. It is a practice of transformation, requiring critical reflection, systemic adaptation, and emotional engagement at every level of the educational system. By re-emphasizing this understanding of educational inclusion, this thesis challenges the status quo and invites educators, researchers, and policymakers to rethink what inclusion can mean and how it can be enacted. It points toward a future where schools are built on the premise of diversity rather than sameness, thus expanding the possibilities for how students can learn and who they can become.

8.3. The return of special education

In chapter 2, I discussed the recent development in the Danish educational landscape relating to inclusive education: the emergence of middle forms. Middle forms are organizational innovations that aim to bridge the gap between segregated special education and mainstream classrooms by providing differentiated groups for some students some of the time within the mainstream school. However, middle forms remain a floating signifier—an empty vessel whose meaning and function are still being shaped as it materializes in different practices. As more studies of its implementation emerge, a clearer picture of its role in the Danish educational landscape will take shape. From the perspective of this dissertation, however, a fundamental skepticism seems warranted.

As is highlighted throughout this dissertation, the inclusive education paradigm and its proponents have consistently drawn attention to the persistence of traditional, deficiency-based, and individually oriented perceptions of student dis/ability and difference. These ideas often infiltrate and dilute inclusive agendas. In this context, middle forms risk becoming a new iteration of segregation, albeit one that occurs locally within mainstream schools rather than in separate "special" venues.

There are indications that special educational language and practices are regaining prominence, especially in light of the struggles faced by inclusive education as a paradigm (Allan and Slee 2019). This trend is evident in the Danish context. For example, when teacher education was reformed in 2023, a course in special education was revised from being an elective to becoming an integral and more comprehensive part of the program. But its name went unchanged. One new course was entitled *Pedagogical Psychology, Special Education, and Inclusion*. The course called *Special Education* was also made a distinct teaching subject (in Danish: undervisningsfag) alongside core subjects like Danish, English, and Science. While this reflects an increasing focus on these topics in educational debates, it is noteworthy—given the dominance of inclusive education in research—that special education was positioned as the main rubric and framework.

Similarly, there has been an increase in the number of research-based books advocating a combined special education and inclusion approach in Denmark (e.g., Hedegaard-Sørensen 2013; Tetler and Hedegaard-Sørensen 2023; Skibsted and Munkholm 2024). These works have articulated a "critique of the critique" of special education (Hedegaard-Sørensen 2013). This critique highlights a persistent lack of empirical research to inform the often highly conceptual debates within inclusive education research. It is argued that the everyday challenges faced by teachers and students in schools have been underprioritized, which has left research unable to address these issues constructively—in a way that does not vilify school professionals. The growing use of special education terminology to describe schools' work with learner differences can thus be seen as a response to the framing of inclusive education as a "failed agenda." Within this discourse, special education is positioned as a model better suited to address the practical challenges that inclusion is perceived as unable to solve.

The term "inclusive special education" has been used to describe this middle ground, where inclusive education's structural focus and special education's attention to individual specificities converge (Hedegaard-Sørensen 2013; Hornby 2014). Florian (2014; 2019) has argued for the necessary coexistence of inclusive and special education, suggesting that special education frameworks have a role in mediating individually tailored support for students with impairment—students who might otherwise be further marginalized by inclusive education's focus on all students. This view is supported by Hedegaard-Sørensen and Hamre (2024), who likewise portray the combination of the two paradigms in teaching as the pragmatic way forward. However, as Florian also points out, blending inclusive and special education requires a critical rethinking of special education itself. Although special education was designed to support students at the margins of mainstream education, it has had unintended consequences—such as stigmatization, differential outcomes, and inequitable treatments linked to race, class, and gender (Florian 2014). As I argue in this dissertation, traditional special educational approaches to addressing student differences are already entrenched in school practices and research, even when operating under the banner of inclusive education. Following the findings of this dissertation, we may observe that merging special education and inclusive education into a middle-ground approach poses some noteworthy challenges. What follows are three main points in support of this general observation

First, this overlap risks further blurring the boundaries between the two systems. As is shown in this dissertation, deficiency-based logics already infiltrate practices labeled as inclusive. The concept of "inclusive special education" amplifies this confusion, as practitioners may struggle to discern how the "inclusive" component fundamentally redefines the "special" component. If we fail to address these foundational assumptions, deficiency-based practices may persist, cloaked in the language of inclusion and giving the illusion of alignment with inclusive ideals.

Second, the persistence of special education logics reinforces the framing of some students' needs as "special" rather than part of natural student variation. As Poulsen (2017) and Testmann (2021) note, actions by a child with a "special needs" label are often interpreted and treated differently than identical (or highly similar) actions performed by a child who bears no such label. This framing exacerbates the perceived differences of some

students, reinforcing their marginalization within the classroom. While methods from special education could contribute to fostering inclusivity, they must be reimagined within inclusive frameworks rather than simply being added on. This reimagining requires an ontological shift: dis/ability must be understood as a product of social and material contexts rather than as an inherent deficiency. Additionally, knowledge and teaching methods from special education must be critically scrutinized for remnants of deficit-based orientations. Positioning these tools as part of a broader didactic repertoire—rather than exclusive interventions for "special" students—is essential if special education is to contribute to dismantling deficit logics and fostering a more inclusive educational ethos.

Third, merging inclusive and special education frameworks can exacerbate a sense of inadequacy among teachers who lack formal special education credentials. When teachers feel unequipped to meet diverse needs, they may distance themselves from inclusive education and perceive some students as standing outside their sphere of responsibility. Similarly, when teacher education programs treat special education as separate from "normal" didactics, leadership, and pedagogical theory, they reinforce the idea that inclusive work is an additional responsibility—something outside the core expectations of mainstream teaching. Instead, inclusive education should inform all aspects of teacher preparation. It should be established as a fundamental component of what it means to be a teacher today.

Following this line of argumentation, merging the two approaches risks undermining inclusion's transformative potential, leading instead to the perpetuation of individualized approaches under an inclusive label. As Florian (2019) argues, future developments must focus on extending what is generally available in mainstream schools to a wider range of learners. When collaboration occurs between classroom teachers and specialists in ways that support the learning of all students, special education knowledge can contribute meaningfully to inclusive education's goals. However, if targeted interventions aimed at addressing individual needs remain dominant, there is a risk of perpetuating exclusion under a different guise while blaming inclusive education for any unintended consequences. Teachers, as the professionals responsible for teaching, deserve comprehensive training in how to teach inclusively and how to flexibly adapt their professional roles. They must be equipped to create multiple points of entry into academic content, ensuring that all students have

opportunities to participate and thrive. To realize this vision, it is essential to challenge the perception of inclusion as an additional burden for teachers to shoulder, or a niche concern for specialists. Instead, the emphasis should be on fostering collaboration, innovation, and pedagogical curiosity within mainstream classrooms. Frohn (2024) is a recent advocate of mainstreaming inclusive education into everyday pedagogical practices, imagining this to be an integral part of didactics. Aligning with this perspective, the findings here emphasize the importance of embedding inclusive principles into the core of teaching and organizational practices, ensuring they are accessible and beneficial to all learners.

It is important to note that it is not the responsibility of teachers alone to make inclusive education a reality. The realization of that ambition requires the collective effort of everyone involved in schooling—policymakers, administrators, specialists, and support staff—to ensure that inclusion is supported at all levels. A difficult objective for proponents of inclusion lies in contributing the practical tools requested by practitioners without losing an understanding of the situated, contextual, and dynamic issues that lie at the core of the phenomenon. Inclusive education has, in many contexts, been implemented more as a cost-saving measure than as a genuine transformation aimed at creating room for difference in mainstream schools. This is compounded by the concurrent demands for higher academic performance, which further divert attention away from efforts to meaningfully include all students. As a result, inclusive education has not yet been realistically attempted. This is evident in the persistence of deficiency logics, which continue to guide much of the work in mainstream schools. The problems also emerge in the affective economy of inclusion, where emotions such as frustration, guilt, and resignation circulate and shape inclusion as an educational (im)possibility. To address these challenges, inclusive education must move beyond rhetoric and become an actionable priority, embedded in both the training of teachers and the wider structural conditions of schooling. Special educational tools and knowledge can play an important role in this process if they are employed to further the structural, transformative aims of inclusive education for all children.

8.4. Limitations and contributions

This section critically reflects on the methodological and theoretical limitations of the study while highlighting its contributions to inclusive education research. By acknowledging the constraints of its approach, this dissertation situates its findings in relation to the complexities of studying inclusive education. Some of the limitations discussed here also emerge as strengths, reflecting deliberate choices that prioritize a structural and systemic lens. The aim is to contextualize the dissertation's findings and to demonstrate how they add value to ongoing conversations in the field.

8.4.1. Theoretical perspectives

This dissertation reflects a commitment to examining the systemic and structural forces that shape inclusive education while taking inclusion seriously in terms of its own basic theoretical premise: inclusive education is a concept fundamentally aimed at fostering structural change and creating school environments where all children belong. While many studies claim to explore inclusion, they often take students labeled with "special educational needs" as their starting point, focusing on where such students are placed or how they perform within existing structures. These approaches frequently conflate inclusion with classical special education practices, emphasizing individual accommodations rather than systemic transformation. By contrast, this dissertation conceptualizes inclusion as concerning all children and as a transformative paradigm that positions difference as an ontological point of departure. A central contribution of this work lies in embracing this premise, a stance that aligns with how prominent proponents of inclusive education conceptualize it (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2006; Allan 2023; Florian 2019; Nilholm 2021; Slee 2011; 2018).

At the same time, critical dis/ability studies—the guiding framework of this dissertation—have faced critiques from within dis/ability studies for its emphasis on discursive and structural production of dis/ability, which can sometimes overshadow the lived realities of impairment. In chapter 3 I mention this debate, where Siebers (2001), for example, has cautioned against framing dis/ability simply as a powerful tool for analysis, arguing instead that dis/ability studies must remain grounded in the political struggles of dis/abled people and maintain a realistic conception of the dis/abled body. I acknowledge this important critique and recognize that

the theoretical work this dissertation builds upon—and contributes to—owes a profound debt to dis/ability activists and scholars who have drawn on their lived experiences to develop the frameworks I work with. While this dissertation does position the concept of dis/ability as a powerful tool of disruption, it does so with the intention of making school a better place for all children, dis/abled and non-dis/abled alike, aligning with Siebers' (2001) overarching political aims. Pursuing this line of inquiry avoids positioning groups of students against one another or narrowly defining inclusion in terms of "special" needs. Instead, it adopts a broader lens that reexamines how schools organize themselves and how ableist assumptions continue to inform educational practices, producing disabling situations.

I also wish to address the potential pitfalls of theorizing inclusive education as a paradigm for all children. While framing inclusion as relevant to all students aligns with its transformative aspirations, this broad focus risks diluting the term, making it so unspecific that it loses meaning (Miles and Singal 2010). Such a dilution could undermine its utility in both theory and practice, blurring the boundaries between inclusive education and general education. One of the teachers I interviewed commented on this, as I asked her if she associated inclusive education with special education. She said:

> Yes, because otherwise, I think everything can count, I mean, then it doesn't matter—it makes the word meaningless. I mean, it's for those who require something special, where we have many pedagogical notes, where we hold network meetings, and where there needs to be a psychologist or social worker or guidance from others, special provisions and such, right? Because all children should be included in different ways—that's just the class teacher's task, or that's just the job of the public school.

All of the school professionals that I interviewed had associations to "special educational needs" and possible diagnoses when discussing inclusive education. However, most of them contended something similar to what the teacher in the above quote says at the end–that inclusion in another sense is part of the core mission of schools and teachers. Thus, there is a conceptual tension here between inclusion in the broad sense, and the perceived need for a specific term to describe the extra work being

done to ensure the inclusion of some students. In this dissertation I have argued following Florian (2019) that inclusive education is about extending that which is available to most students in school to encompass all students. This involves breaking with the bell-curve organizing of teaching that constructs the needs of some students as normal and others' needs as "special". Such an approach contradicts the need for inclusive education to refer to a specific group of students, highlighting instead how all students have different educational needs that should be addressed in their schools. In this way, I position inclusive education as the job of the public school, rather than as being for those who require something special.

That said, I am acutely aware that when deficit-based conceptions of ability guide school practices, students with impairments often bear the greatest burden of exclusion. As such, even while adopting a structural perspective, I remain mindful of how these logics disproportionately act to disable some students. For example, the figure of the "inclusion-child," as explored in chapter 7, reveals how systemic anxieties about inclusion manifest themselves in ways that disproportionately position certain children as problems to be managed. Moreover, the discussion in chapter 7 illustrates how emotions like frustration, guilt, and resignation co-constitute students who struggle to live up to behavioral expectations as being more difficult to include than others. While the theoretical focus on inclusive education as a structural concept aimed at all children may not fully capture the particular vulnerabilities faced by specific groups of students, it avoids the risks inherent in narrowly targeting certain categories of people. Such a focus could lead to essentializing the experiences of belonging to a social group or living with specific impairments, potentially obscuring the multiplicity and fluidity of lived experiences within those groups (Olsen and Pilson 2022). By emphasizing attention to broader processes of marginalization, this dissertation aims to illuminate the shared systemic challenges that drive exclusion. Both purely structural approaches and those focusing on specific marginalized positions are necessary to fully understand the complexities of inclusion. The perspective used here adds a critical dimension to the conversation by offering insights into the systemic dynamics that underpin exclusionary practices. In this way it complements studies like Youdell (2006) or Annamma (2017), that describe specific marginalized positions more in-depth, while still employing a structural perspective.

8.4.2. Methodological perspectives

A limitation of the methodological approach adopted in this thesis lies in its application of intersectionality within critical dis/ability studies. While critical dis/ability studies is deeply informed by intersectional perspectives, this study has not fully explored how multiple axes of identity—such as gender, class, and race—shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, boys dominate my empirical material in terms of classroom conflicts and norm disruptions and are also overrepresented in statistics in terms of referrals to special schools (Andreasen et al. 2022). Conversely, girls often occupy less visible, excluded positions, highlighting a different dynamic of marginalization that this dissertation has not fully addressed.

Although chapter 7 examines how the "inclusion-child" is co-produced by affect, these analyses could be further enriched by exploring how gender and race intersect with this positionality. For example, the affects associated with the "inclusion-child"—such as frustration, guilt, or care—are probably mediated by gendered and racialized assumptions, shaping how students are positioned within or outside the classroom community. While these intersections remain underexplored here, they represent crucial avenues for future research, particularly in advancing critical dis/ability studies' ability to interrogate the relational and systemic production of exclusion across diverse identities. The DisCrit framework, which combines critical race studies with dis/ability studies (e.g., Annamma, 2017; Schalk and Kim 2020), and feminist dis/ability studies (e.g., Garland-Thomson 2005) have already made significant contributions in this area, offering valuable models for future work.

Another methodological limitation is the limited incorporation of children's perspectives in the work published as part of this dissertation. While I have access to data from group interviews conducted by teachers with students, this material has primarily served as contextual background rather than being explicitly analyzed. Additionally, my fieldwork could have been designed with a more structured focus on the perspectives of students themselves. As the primary subjects of inclusion, students are uniquely positioned to illuminate what it means to be included, how it feels, and how inclusion is experienced in practice (Messiou, 2017). This omission represents a missed opportunity to directly engage with the voices of those most affected by inclusive education efforts.

However, these perspectives have been foregrounded in recent Danish dissertations, including Poulsen (2017) and Testmann (2021), who provide valuable insights into how students perceive and navigate inclusion. These works complement the structural and relational focus of this dissertation by centering on the lived experiences of inclusion from students' perspectives. While student voices are not directly analyzed in my study, I see potential for incorporating this material in future publications. Including these perspectives could add an essential dimension to ongoing discussions of inclusion, ensuring that children's voices remain central to reimagining inclusive education.

A key methodological contribution of this dissertation is its effort to bridge the divide between theoretical and empirical approaches in inclusive education research. As outlined in the introduction, the field is often divided between theoretical critiques of exclusionary practices and empirical studies focused on classroom-level interventions. This dissertation seeks to occupy a middle ground, integrating a robust theoretical foundation with grounded engagement in empirical material. By combining critical dis/ability studies and affect theory with interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, this work connects systemic critiques with the lived realities of everyday school life. My overarching critique of individualized, medicalized conceptualizations allowed me to examine how such ideas are enacted in practice, while also highlighting examples of inclusive practices that succeed in resisting these logics. Moreover, this approach enabled an exploration of the emotional dynamics that orient school professionals away from inclusive efforts, revealing their complexity. Finally, my approach facilitated a reflexive discussion of how research practices themselves can avoid perpetuating the exclusionary structures they aim to critique. This dual approach allows for a productive, forward-looking understanding of how structural, relational, and affective dimensions shape inclusion in practice. It also demonstrates how theoretical commitments can inform and be informed by the lived dynamics of schools. In this way, the dissertation contributes to reimagining inclusive education as both a critical and practical endeavor—one that addresses systemic ableism while remaining closely tied to the complexities of educational practices and experiences.

8.5. Future orientations

As was discussed in chapter 2, the 2012 inclusion reform in Denmark set ambitious targets for both inclusion and academic performance without, however, being accompanied by sufficient investment of the resources necessary to achieve these goals. While it is evident that there is a need for more—such as increased funding for improving the physical environment, teacher training, smaller class sizes, and co-teaching models—this dissertation highlights the fact that resources alone are insufficient to address the challenges of inclusive education. If resources are not directed toward challenging the emotional, organizational, and normative structures of deficiency thinking, they risk reinforcing exclusionary practices. One key avenue for future research lies in examining how resources can be utilized to facilitate structural and relational approaches to inclusion. For example, how might investments in teacher training encourage pedagogical strategies that disrupt deficit-based logics? Addressing such questions is essential to ensuring that resource allocation contributes to a reimagining of inclusion, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

The findings of my research also underline the significant theoretical contributions of critical dis/ability studies to understanding and addressing marginalization in schools. This framework offers novel ways of challenging the normalization of performance culture, the increasing pathologization of difference, and the resulting narrowing of the frame of normality. By critically interrogating the ableist assumptions that underpin deficit-based logics, critical dis/ability studies and its crip theory strain provide tools to reimagine inclusion as a structural and relational process rather than an individual problem to be managed. An interesting development in this direction is the Universal Design for Learning framework (e.g. Molbæk and Hedegaard-Sørensen 2023), which builds on many of the same arguments presented here and incorporates a very practical approach to classroom pedagogy. Future studies could benefit from an increased commitment to these theoretical approaches, which bring essential perspectives on the complexities of education in contemporary schools.

Future research must also structurally integrate children's voices to order to gain deeper insights into how inclusion is experienced and understood from their perspective. While the voices of teachers and administrators

often dominate discussions about inclusion, including my own work, children are the supposed beneficiaries of inclusive policies and practices and can therefore provide unique and critical perspectives. For instance, my own data, which has not been fully utilized here, offers significant potential to illuminate children's feelings of both empathy and unfairness regarding the special accommodations awarded to some of their peers. Based on my experiences, children themselves are likely to emerge as powerful advocates of an "all children" approach to inclusion. Their perspectives can challenge the adult-centric framing of inclusion and highlight the relational and communal aspects of school life that support or hinder belonging. In many ways, the childist perspective (Wall 2019) works similarly to crip provocations, offering fundamentally different takes on schooling. A crip childist perspective might therefore offer a new venue of critical potentiality for research in (inclusive) education.

8.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation enters into conversation with inclusive education research by posing the research question: **how can an approach rooted in dis/ability and affect provide both a critical lens on the ableist normative structures of schooling and a constructive imagination for inclusive education in Danish schools?** Critically examining systemic, relational, and affective dimensions, it addresses challenges such as the medical model's dominance, deficit-based practices, and the emotional dynamics that shape inclusion and its enactment in practice. Through a reflexive account of research practices, the dissertation emphasizes the need to scrutinize methodologies to avoid perpetuating reductive representations of inclusion and to fully capture its structural and transformative potential. Empirically, the thesis illuminates how deficiency logics manifest themselves in everyday practices and thinking in schools. By framing inclusion as something already happening, rather than as an unattainable ideal, the dissertation counters a dominant narrative about inclusive education today. Furthermore, the affective perspective highlights that inclusive education is far from a neutral agenda, thus offering new insights into the complex translation to practice. The approaches used in the analyses reframe inclusion as a relational, systemic and affective process, challenging deficit-based assumptions and highlighting its iterative and transformative nature. By linking critical dis/ability studies and affect theory, this dissertation offers both a critical

lens on exclusionary structures and a constructive vision for re-emphasizing inclusive education as a practice that values diversity as something foundational rather than as a challenge that has to be managed.

Chapter 9. Literature

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