

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SWEDEN: RESPONSES, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS

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This paper maps out the challenges and responses to inclusive education in Sweden from a cultural/historical point of view. Core concepts that have bearing on inclusive education practices are discussed. The analysis incorporates varied materials. As the current Swedish political and educational discourses reflect contradictions and dilemmas among varied dimensions of the educational arena, the analysis has been conceptualized in terms of the assumption that policy and practice decisions involve dilemmas. Swedish social welfare/educational policy has traditionally been underpinned by a strong philosophy of universalism, equal entitlements of citizenship, comprehensiveness, and solidarity as an instrument to promote social inclusion and equality of resources. Within the past decades, however, Sweden has undergone a dramatic transformation. The changes are framed within neo-liberal philosophies such as devolution, market solutions, competition, *effectivity*, and standardization, coupled with a proliferation of individual/parent choices for independent schools, all of which potentially work against the valuing of diversity, equity and inclusion. Marginalization and segregation of socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups has increased. Result and resource differences have widened among schools and municipalities and among pupils. Swedish efforts in the past to promote equity through a variety of educational policies have been fascinating. Those early educational policies, including the macro political agenda focused on the social welfare model, have helped to diminish the effects of differential social, cultural, and economic background on outcomes. This has come under threat. There is still some hope, however, of mitigating the situation through varied social and educational measures combined with an effective monitoring system and a stronger partnership and transparent working relationship between the central and local government systems. Research and follow-up are crucial in this process.

Introduction

One may not grasp the complexity, multidimensionality and problematic nature of the concept of inclusive education until one finds himself or herself in a situation where he or she is confronted with its practical ramifications. In a literature seminar with a small group of students who were pursuing their postgraduate studies in Special Educator Programme, I, as a seminar leader, raised the notion of inclusive education as a discussion theme. The group had a heated debate. I had no a clue until then that the concept could be conceived in so many different ways or that the whole agenda was of such a sensitive, controversial and dilemmatic nature.

To begin with, there is a semantic problem associated with the concept when one translates it to Swedish, a problem to which we will return later. The student group consisted of a principal and five teachers with many years of experience as regular teachers and/or special education teachers. Three of the teachers had their own disabled children or children with special educational needs. In that discussion I noted at various degrees the simultaneous voices and concerns of parents, ordinary teachers and school leadership. Sometimes these roles overlap. I remember several concerns from that discussion. The stakeholders raised contentious issues such as:

- (a) In Sweden parents have a choice and they may prefer a segregated school setting. In this case there would seem to be no option but to maintain segregated provision. Then the question follows, Should not a child's right to inclusion take precedence over parental choice?
- (b) What about the disabled children's wishes, voices? What if they want to mix with other students with similar special needs or disability? *This human need for solidarity and connectedness cannot be neglected* noted some of the participants.

(c) How do students who need to have calm and highly structured settings learn in association with children with profound disabilities and severe behavioural and emotional problems? What about the ever-increasing number of hyperactive and violent students? What kind of support services can be available in an ordinary classroom?

(d) Questions were raised of individual rights versus the common interest.

(e) How are we going to deal with the *common frame of reference* which has been and *is* still Sweden's fundamental value, a cornerstone of social justice, in the face of a strong trend towards *difference*, individuality, competition and freedom of choice spearheaded by the neo-liberal political agenda?

(f) What do equity, equivalence and equality mean in educational practice in the face of shifting political discourse and rhetoric? In the Swedish language these terms are vague and problematic. Although we all drowned in intense arguments, there remained throughout a positive spirit to the word *inclusion*. This was my first real confrontation with the issues of participation, equity, equivalence, freedom of choice, social justice, individual rights and democracy as a collective matter versus autonomy in relation to an inclusive agenda in discussions with people who have first-hand contact with the daily life of schools.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first is to map out the challenges and responses to inclusive education in Sweden (in particular at its systemic level) from a cultural- historical point of view, because a country's education system and its core values emerge in a historical context and they reflect contextual and national characteristics. The second is to analyze core concepts that have bearing on how we conceive and implement the inclusive agenda. As an off-shoot of this general investigatory theme, the paper will shed light on how constructions of inclusive education are mediated in Sweden by (a) purposes and goals of public education, and (b) collective understandings and educational responses to sociocultural differences.

The analysis incorporates the political intentions, rhetoric and the praxis gathered from government reports, research materials and commissioned evaluation. Sweden's current political and educational discourses reflect contradictions and dilemmas between community and individual, utility and culture, public and personal, economy and welfare, and individual agency versus collective and political action. The analysis has therefore placed these discourses within the framework of a dilemmatic perspective. It is conceptualised in terms of the assumption that policy and practice decisions involve dilemmas (Clark, Dyson, & Millward, 1998; Dyson & Millward, 2000). Billig et al. (1988, p. 163) noted that dilemmas arise from a *culture which produces more than one possible ideal world*. Given the tensions that can arise from different values, it follows that dilemmas are a condition of our humanity (Norwich, 2008, p. 288). Special needs education is also a specific, socioculturally situated response to our fundamental dilemma in order to deal with or to *confront* a modern education system for fundamental education (Nilholm, 2006a).

The paper is organized in four major sections. The first section deals with the education policy, system, and general context; the second addresses, in particular, inclusive educational policies and practices; the third deals with democratic values and participation in school and society; the fourth dwells on issues of equity, equivalence and equality. At the end, a summary of the practice and ideological conversation is presented, including concluding remarks.

The Education Policy in Sweden: The General Context

In 1842, a policy termed *allmän folkskola* (folk school) came into force. Before that education was reserved only for middle- and upper-class society. The policy was primarily meant to provide schooling for all citizens, although in practice two parallel school systems evolved: one for the poor and disadvantaged, and the other for stronger elements of society. Even so, the policy's intention was noble, and we can still trace Sweden's long tradition of comprehensive, compulsory and equivalent education from this time. It is also from this time that special needs education established its roots as a two-track system (i.e., special education and regular education settings crystallized). In the special education track the so-called *problem-child* was categorized using different nomenclature such as *idiot*, *poor*, *feeble-minded*, *imbecile*, and *dullard*. As we entered in to mid-twentieth century, these categories changed into *intellectually disabled*, *learning disabled*, and *mentally retarded*. During the last two decades the general category became *pupils with special needs* but with a new culture of diagnosis based on neuropsychiatric methods, such as ADHD, DAMP, autism, or Aspergers syndrome, on the rise. This indicates how classification and categorization has been an activity *as old as schools themselves* (Mehan, 1993, p. 243; Hjärne, 2004; Skolverket, 2005).

Since then a number of school reforms have taken place that aim at a school system combining quality and equality. Education can be described as one of the cornerstones of the modern welfare state. This has been manifested heavily in Sweden, which was dominated by a social democratic model. Strong Labour parties were able to secure broad support for their policies during the interwar period and after the Second World War, with solidarity, community and equality as the keywords. There were high hopes that uniform, free-of-charge education for children from all social strata would contribute to equality and justice, and promote social cohesion. Although the belief in the potential of education in this respect may have faded, education is still regarded as one of the major methods of preventing unemployment, social exclusion and ill health (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). *Hence, contemporary policy for equity is very much a latter day echo of the social democrats' age-old concept of the peoples' home* (OECD, 2005).

Sweden's reputation for successfully combining effective economy and social welfare measures is still unscathed in many ways. By OECD's measure, Sweden is an affluent, healthy and well-educated society. Its population is about 9 million, of which approximately 20% come from an immigrant background. Its strongly unique combination of social equality and equity measures, underpinned by high levels of taxation and public spending based on redistributive policies, together with a regulated capitalist economic system, has brought about this success. Its GDP per capita is \$28,100, compared to \$26,000 GDP per capita total OECD. Overall educational attainment is quite high, with at least 80% of the population having attained upper secondary education and an average life expectancy at birth of 82.8 years for women and 77.7 for men. Furthermore, it has one of the highest OECD employment-to-population ratios, with 74% of the population at work. This is third only to Switzerland and Denmark. Sweden also has one of the highest OECD employment rates for mothers, second only to Portugal. Some 78% of all mothers of children under age seven were working in 2003 (OECD, 2005). Compared with OECD nations, Sweden is one of the leading countries by many standards, be it educational achievement or literacy levels. It is among the highest in social expenditure as a proportion of GDP; it has one of the lowest poverty rates and the lowest levels of income inequality in OECD countries. The list goes on.

Most of the modern history of Sweden is characterized by collective action spearheaded by a social democratic welfare state and is a prominent example of social democratic welfare state favouring full employment and a focus on minimizing differences, social alienation and exclusion as opposed to individual responsibility and market solutions (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; OECD, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2005). This political and cultural background has been instrumental in creating an early and fertile platform from which to criticize the traditional special educational and exclusionary approach and to formulate concepts such as normalization, integration and mainstreaming (Nirje, 1992; Wolfensberger, 1972). This background has fostered awareness and cultural messages of the significance of social inclusiveness and has resulted in organisation changes such as closing large institutions for intellectually disabled persons and building community-based residential, learning and working environments. This was a remarkable achievement by any standard. The social motives of education that are citizenship, social integration, social equality and democracy had as much importance as economic motivations, not only in Sweden but also in Scandinavia as a whole. However, in the last decade's welfare and education policies have been increasingly influenced by market logic, and economic motives have been given more weight. The neo-liberal wave in the 1980s and 1990s also had an impact in the Scandinavian countries. Several researchers question whether it is still reasonable to speak of a distinct Nordic welfare model any longer. However, Kautto, Fritzell, Hvinden, Kvist, & Uusitalo (2001) and Vogel, Svallfors, Theorell, Noll, & Christoph (2003) come to the conclusion that the Nordic countries still stand out from other European and OECD nations, and there is reason to speak about a Nordic welfare model. The question of whether this is also true for education is, however, seldom or never addressed. (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006, p. 286)

The slogan *A school for all* (En skola för alla) embellished most of the policy documents and government-commissioned reports and propositions in the 1960s, 70s, and through until the late 80s as a component of the inclusive and caring welfare state. In 1962 (LGR 62), a 9-year unified compulsory school program for all children ages 7 to 16 was introduced. This compulsory curriculum emphasized that pupils come at the centre of the learning process and that they should be helped to achieve multisided development within the framework of a school for all or a common frame of reference.

Current Swedish educational policy documents recognize that students are *different*. That has important implications in how schooling is organized and therefore the learning process and the avenues to reach goals. The Curriculum for the Compulsory School System specifically states: *Consideration should be*

taken of the different abilities and needs of the students. There are different ways to reach the goal. . . . Hence teaching cannot be designed in the same way for everyone (LPO94, p. 6). That diversity also has consequences for what goals the students attain is, however, not an idea that has been adopted by the regular school in Sweden. On the contrary, one maintains that all students should reach the same goals (Göransson, 2006, p. 71). Göransson argues further that, if one adopts the idea about diversity among children as meaning that they learn in different ways, but not as meaning that they also develop differently and attain different goals, the traditional idea that conformity is the norm reappears in the idea that all children can learn the same things (Ibid.).

While Swedish education policies have a solid history and culture of solidarity, community and social responsibility, Sweden also has deep cultural values and historical heritage that support self-realization, individual productivity, competition and social competence. However, recent trends show that there seems to be a *conjunction* in a direction of *business oriented management styles* characterized by an *overemphasis* on efficiency, standardization, consumerism, individual choices and rights and a *deemphasis* on collectivism and solidarity. Reports evidence not only fragmentation of educational policy-making but also contradictory messages related to conception of knowledge, social justice, equity and equality issues (e.g., Korp, 2006; Beach & Dovemark, 2007). This has also impacted on student achievement profiles and marginalized a large segment of the student population from ordinary educational settings.

The Swedish public education system is composed of compulsory and noncompulsory schooling. Compulsory education includes regular compulsory school, Sami school, special school, and programs for pupils with learning disabilities. (Sami is an ethnic group with ill-defined genetic origins, living in the northern areas of the Scandinavian Peninsula and Russia.) Noncompulsory education includes the *preschool class*, upper secondary school, upper secondary school for pupils with learning disabilities, municipal adult education, and adult education for adults with learning disabilities. The 9-year compulsory school program is for all children between ages 7 and 16. All education throughout the public school system is free. There is usually no charge to students or their parents for teaching materials, school meals, health services or transport. The education system has focused on providing equality of opportunities and equivalence of outcomes (<http://www.skolverket.se>, OECD, 2005). However, the system has undergone a number of important reforms in the past 18 years that have a strong bearing on equity.

Inclusive Educational Policies and Practices

As mentioned earlier, the post-war Swedish educational policy measures are characterized by comprehensiveness, equity and *inclusion* as coined in the slogan *A school for all*. That did not stop differentiation, classification and categorization of children, as well as segregated educational placements. In fact, paradoxically, the amount of special education, as Emanuelsson, Haug, and Persson (2005) noted, has increased steadily. Vast differences have been observed in how pupils with special needs are actually defined and registered in different municipalities. This is, of course, partly the consequence of a decentralised education system that manifests itself in divergent local practices (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2010).

Sweden has signed The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (U.N., 1989), the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (U.N., 1993), and UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). These are all powerful tools to prevent exclusionary activities in the school sector and make a strong case for inclusion. These documents have shaped a number of important government reports, directives and policies and worked to place inclusive education firmly on the agenda. Political expression, however, has not matched practice. As Emanuelsson et al. (2005) noted, *the school act, the School ordinances and the National Curricula all emphasise the importance of solidarity, the right to education of equal value and the right for pupils who experience difficulties for various reasons to receive the help and support they need. Local schools, however, often find this unrealistic, which indicates that the gap between political intentions and practical realities is considerable* (p. 122).

The Swedish Education Act states that all children shall have equal access to education, and that all children shall enjoy this right, regardless of gender, residence, or social or economic factors. Special support shall also be given to students who have difficulty with the schoolwork. Most students with a need for special support are taught in regular classes in compulsory and upper secondary schools. There are also a certain number of special remedial classes for students with functional disabilities, and for

students with social and emotional problems. Effective 1 July 1994, programs for pupils with learning disabilities use the same curriculum as do regular compulsory and upper secondary schools. This is a way of marking that all pupils, regardless of learning development, fall under the same fundamental values. The special programs do, however, use their own syllabi adapted to this form of education and to the different needs they must meet for each one of their pupils. On paper and in accordance with Swedish law, parents have a right to choose between the two school forms. Whether it is an opportunity in reality is, however, questioned in an evaluation by the National Board of Education (Skolverket, 2002, in Göransson, 2006).

Government concern to provide appropriate services to special needs children within the regular school framework has been outlined in the first Swedish National Curriculum (LGR 62) where *the contents and organization of special education were carefully specified and the accompanying proposal was for a system of coordinated special education as alternative to remedial and special classes* (p. 120). However, it was not until the 1969 national curriculum (LGR 69) came into force that increased emphasis was given to integrating children with various forms of disability into regular education. The discourses in this new curriculum have many similarities with the current inclusive agenda, although the term used then was *integration*. One significant perspective shift in the curriculum and official reports of the time and the 70s was the statement that the school's environment represents a possible cause of children's difficulties in school (Skolverket, 2005). Consequently, the discourses of the *categorical* versus the *relational perspective* evolved (Emanuelsson, Persson, & Rosenqvist, 2001; Emanuelsson et al., 2005).

The Categorical Model Versus the Relational Model

The *categorical* model described in several Swedish reports is the one referred to in the international research (see Mitchell, 2005) as the *within-child model*, the *medical model*, the *psych-medical model*, the *discourse of deviance*, the *defect model*, and the *pathological model*. In this paradigm, school failure is ascribed to some defect, pathology, or inadequacy located within the student. The *relational* model is variously referred to as the *social model*, the *socio-political model*, the *socio-political paradigm*, and the *deficient system model*. In line with this, the term *students with difficulties* was challenged and began to be replaced by *students in difficulties* (Emanuelsson et al., 2001). Fierce criticism against the traditional and categorical special pedagogical perspective has brought about paradigmatic shift and a policy deeply ingrained with a relational perspective (which is more environment-oriented) as a guiding principle. However, the categorical perspective, which is associated with traditional, segregative and exclusionary approaches, has not given way to the relational perspective. In fact, the categorical perspective made an upsurge in the 90s and has since then dominated both special education research and praxis in Sweden. The recent growth in categorization, identification and classification within the framework of *redesigning regular education support* in the ordinary school system in an effort to facilitate inclusion has been criticized by one prominent Swedish professor of special education:

Once children are identified as different ... they become problematic to mainstream schools and teachers. From within the categorical perspective the process of labelling children as having difficulties has the effect of investing the source of any difficulty or problem within the child. Once this process is complete, then it becomes easier to transfer the responsibility to specialists trained to deal with the problems exhibited by the child. (Emanuelsson, 2001, p. 135)

What Happened in the 90s?

Many of the social and educational changes made in the early 90s were dramatic. Observers might ask why there occurred such a huge shift from the traditional inclusive, collective frame of reference and social justice towards individual rights, parental choice and market-oriented policies. Signs of such changes could be observed already in late 80s. But the landmark was the accession to power of the *right wing* party in 1991 (coalition government headed by Conservative Carl Bildt during 1991-94). The country was in deep recession and employment rates fell, followed by a sharp decrease in social expenditures and a move towards further socioeconomic inequalities. The situation abated in the mid-1990s. In consequence of this political change, however, education was increasingly regarded as a private rather than a public good. Rationales for educational attainment changed from emphasis on collective values and social community to a focus on individual rights, academic progress and choice. A new financial system was introduced, that essentially moved resource allocation from the national to the local level, combined with a new type of steering and control mechanism (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Englund, 2005; OECD, 2005; Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001). This was not an accidental phenomenon. It is part and parcel of global phenomena in our late modernity (Bauman, 1992), high

modernity (Giddens, 1990) and late capitalism, phenomena that are deeply entrenched with values of effectiveness, competition, standardization, freedom of choice, and increasingly individualist and elitist culture.

The impact of the decentralized educational policy on equity is pervasive. Two studies confirm that *... educational expenditure per student (measured in terms of money or teacher density) has fallen rather dramatically during the 1990s – followed by a slight increase after the turn of the millennium. According to Björklund et al. (2004), the teacher/student ratio has decreased by 18.7% during the 1990s. Whether this can be directly attributed to the decentralisation or to the impact of the economic downturn of the 1990s remains an open question. [Björklund, Edin, Frederiksson, & Krueger, 2004; Ahlin & Mörk, 2005 as cited in OECD, 2005]*

Paradoxically, in the footsteps of the introduction of inclusive education, the number of pupils labelled as having special needs increased dramatically. Teachers found themselves incapable of dealing with pupil diversity in the classroom and meeting individual student needs. This has often been regarded as schools' failure to meet the diverse needs of pupils, manifesting itself in resignation and distress among teachers and pupils not achieving set targets. However, it might be questioned whether the inclusive school is anything more than a structural or organizational phenomenon resting upon political rhetoric with little or no anchor in public policy (Persson, 2003). Persson attempted to illustrate the relationship between educational structure and policy historically, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Relationship Between Inclusive and Noninclusive Policy and Structure in Special Needs Education Before and After 1990

	POLICY	STRUCTURE	
PRE 1990	Inclusive	Noninclusive	Political clarity
POST 1990	Noninclusive	Inclusive	Political obscurity

One in five compulsory school pupils in Sweden are judged to be in need of special needs education (Asp-Onsjö, 2006). This means that approximately 200,000 pupils in Sweden receive some kind of special educational support during the school year. At the same time, the number of pupils enrolled in special schools for the intellectually disabled (*särskolan*) has increased from .9% to 1.4% during the last 5 to 6 years (Skolverket, 2002). *From 1992 to 2001 the number of students registered in schools and classrooms for students with severe learning disabilities has increased by 67%* (Rosenqvist, 2007, p. 67).

If collectivism and solidarity towards vulnerable groups of people in society were hallmarks of the post-war period, this era came to an end around 1990. Education as a vehicle for advancing social justice gave way to ideals based upon personal choice and competition. Its role was more or less that of a commodity to be traded in the market place. The language was that of the market (e.g., price labels on pupils, effectiveness, and target fulfilment) rather than that of the social inclusion of difference and diversity. Inclusive education, then, reflected structure rather than policy. The Education for all movement was transformed to a structure of capitalism in the 1990s and the rhetoric of inclusion became a metaphor for the dominance of human capital, manifested in personal choice, over social justice. Citizenship was replaced by stress on individualisation of rights and promotion of dominant social interests (Persson & Berhanu, 2005).

In the beginning of the 1990s a Special Educator Programme was launched that would have significant impact on the praxis of special/inclusive education in Sweden. The programme was in line with a relational or system-based perspective on educational difficulties. In addition to carrying out teaching tasks, Special Educators are expected to supervise, consult and counsel regular teachers on how to meet the needs of all pupils. In line with this, all teacher trainees study special needs education within the so-called General Field of Education and may also study this field of knowledge within an eligible field of study or in specialization courses. The programme was well under way until 2 years ago. Then, a new conservative government came into power and discredited it. A year ago the government reinstated a special teacher programme in which trainees will be expected upon completion to work directly with individual pupils. The focus will therefore be the student, not the system, a dramatic shift from the previous perspective. Currently both programmes exist side-by-side, are offered at an advanced level, comprise 90 credits, one and a half years of full-time study, and qualify graduates for specialist tasks in schools.

Inclusion Versus Integration

Integration and inclusion have been used interchangeably in Swedish educational discourses. Most people are familiar with the term integration. The term inclusion has been difficult to translate into Swedish. That has left many with considerable ambiguities about the use of the term. As in many other countries there is confusion and controversy over the semantics of inclusion. This demonstrates the problematic nature of terms when they cross over into use in other cultures. Many have questioned whether the new terminology means only a linguistic shift or a new agenda. In the first translations into Swedish of UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, inclusion was translated as integration.

Although there is still a conceptual problem of clarity, the difference between integration and inclusion has been sorted out and technically defined by the experts (see, e.g., Nilholm, 2006a). The message of inclusive education as outlined in the Salamanca statement has now begun to permeate the Swedish language, at least in official documents. The social model of disability and the relational nature of disablement have been officially accepted, which implies that schooling as such is more or less disabling or enabling (Corbett & Slee, 2000, p. 143). This in turn requires schools to restructure and adjust their learning environments, pedagogical methods and organizational arrangements.

Policy documents, prepositions and official evaluation documents have, in different wordings, begun to incorporate the core elements of inclusion. That is:

The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. (UNESCO, 1994 ¶7)

What separates the concept of inclusion from the most widely used term, *integration*, can be described as that which “.....involves all students in a community, with no exceptions and irrespective of their intellectual, physical, sensory or other differences, having equal rights to access the culturally valued curriculum of their society as full-time valued members of age-appropriate mainstream classrooms” (Ballard, 1997, p. 244). This statement, on which this paper principally anchors its analysis, is also in line with the following:

Inclusive education is an ambitious and far-reaching notion that is, theoretically, concerned with all students. The concept focuses on the transformation of school cultures to (1) increase access (or presence) of all students (not only marginalized or vulnerable groups), (2) enhance the school personnel's and students' acceptance of all students, (3) maximize student participation in various domains of activity, and (4) increase the achievement of all students. (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2005 as cited in Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006, p. 67)

Yet the term *inclusion* has been hollowed out as a result of the neo-liberalism's political intransigence. One mechanism of draining the term of inclusive education is to relocate it through re-contextualization into different situations, which brings about *simplification, condensation and elaboration and refocusing* (Bernstein, 1990, cited in Nilholm, 2006a). Since the term *inclusion* has positive connotations others confiscate it and apply it in their fields. In the process, the original meaning in reference to educational contexts loses power. That could be one reason why some pessimistic academics argue that the commitments to a philosophy of inclusive education may be in a stall, if not in retreat. Progress in Sweden has certainly slowed over the past few years despite positive policies and intentions at different level of the education system (Persson, 2008, cf. Vislie, 2003).

Despite or, rather, because of the inflated discourses of inclusion and revamping of inclusion policies, the practice is often short of advocacies. For instance, *the number of pupils in special units (grundskolan) increased by as much as 62% during 1993–99, despite promises and statutes* (Westling Allodi, 2002). Unless a whole range of activities, including branding activities and attitudes, are brought under control, legislation alone will not bring about the desired results.

It is clear that there are differences between municipalities and large differences in the type of provision they have made. Most of the reports on inclusion practices indicate that inclusion is happening. However, up-to-date and reliable time series data and data on the number of pupils who are included in the ordinary classroom or on the occurrence of exclusionary special units (classes) are lacking. Even the definition or construction of *special needs* is shifting and is fluid. There seems to be no effective mechanism installed to monitor inclusive/exclusionary processes at regional and national levels (see, e.g., Heimdahl Mattsson, 2006; Nilholm, 2006a), which makes it difficult to document equity in inclusive education.

Ethnic Minority and Socially Disadvantaged Pupils

Inclusive education extends beyond special needs rising from disabilities, and includes consideration of other sources of disadvantage and marginalisation, such as gender, poverty, language, ethnicity, and geographic isolation. The complex interrelationships that exist among these factors and their interactions with disability must also be a focus of attention. (Mitchell, 2005, pp. 1-2)

It is obvious that the education system has come under serious pressure during the past two decades due to massive migration. This exogenous shock has changed the ethnic landscape and composition dramatically and has ushered Sweden into an era of multiculturalism and globalization. On the negative side, this rapid demographic change has also brought with it ethnic segregation and inequalities, particularly in large cities on top of already existing inequalities between municipalities and social groups due to decentralization and competition.

Sweden explicitly adopts multiculturalism and cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (LPO 94); however, terms such as ethnicity, color, and race remain obscure in official taxonomies, educational policies, and school practices. The complex relationships that exist between ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, special needs education, gender, and so forth have recently become a subject of research interest (Rosenqvist, 2007; Berhanu, 2008).

The *fragmentation* of educational policymaking that we witness in the past two decades has negatively affected in particular already vulnerable groups such as the disabled, ethnic minority students, and socially disadvantaged segments of the population. On the basis of a large number of indicators, we can presume that over the next decade Swedish society will become increasingly multiethnic and multilingual, and the number of disadvantaged children will increase substantially. An estimated 20% of the Swedish population comes from an immigrant background. It is predicted that in the demographic landscape in the year 2020 some 30% of all working age individuals in Sweden will have had their roots outside of Sweden (Leijon & Omanovic, 2001; Statistics Sweden, 2004).

A recent report by Gustafsson (2006, p. 93) concludes that during 1992-2000 a consistent and linear increase occurred in school segregation in relation to immigration background, educational background, and grades. A national tracking system enables observation of variable achievement among groups of students. Students with foreign backgrounds receive lower average grades than do their peers, fewer qualify for higher education, and they have a higher dropout rate from upper-secondary education. There are also differences in achievement between girls and boys. Girls receive higher average grades in the majority of all subjects in compulsory and upper-secondary school (OECD, 2005, Barnomsorg och skola i siffer, 2000, cited in Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 306). Results from national examinations in compulsory and upper-secondary schools demonstrate this difference in the subjects of Swedish and, to some extent, English, but show no difference in results in mathematics (ibid). According to a recent OECD (2005) report, 98% of the pupils start upper secondary schools but only 75% finish at the expected age. Some recover through the adult education system. That is Swedes' unique equity issue as they affect higher upper secondary drop-out rates. There is also a very late average age of entry into the labour market (23- to 24-year-olds).

Some recent Swedish studies indicate over-representation of immigrant students out of all proportion to their numbers in special schools and classes (Bel Habib, 2001; Hahne Lundström, 2001; Skolverket, 2000; SOU, 2003). These students were categorized in diffused, vague, symptom-based and pedagogical-related terms such as *concentration and behavioural problems, speech and language difficulties, unspecified poor talent or developmental retardation*. However, extensive and longitudinal studies have yet to be carried out in this specific problem area (see Rosenqvist, 2007) and there is a need for a coherent cumulative body of disproportionality research.

Over-representation is not a new phenomenon. What is new is that fresh forms of exclusion are arising while the force of rhetoric toward inclusive measures is gaining substantial momentum in pedagogical discourses. This Swedish experience is quite similar to that of England as reported by Florian and Rouse (2001): *whilst the government calls for more inclusion and a greater recognition of diversity, it continues to promote social and educational policies that are not supportive of the development of inclusive schools. Indeed, many of the existing market place reforms ignore diversity and stress priorities that make it hard for schools to accept children who will not help them to meet their academic targets* (p. 400). A recent literature review (Berhanu, 2008) demonstrates that the problem is related to, among other reasons, unreliable assessment procedures and criteria for referral and placement; lack of culturally sensitive diagnostic tools; the static nature of tests, including embedded cultural bias; sociocultural problems, family factors, and language problems; lack of parental participation in decision-making; power differentials between parents and school authorities; institutional intransigence and prejudices; and large resource inequalities that run along lines of ethnicity and class.

Although Swedish legislation guarantees bilingual education or mother-tongue instruction at preschool and compulsory school, there is a huge gap between practice and legal commitments. This glaring gap has lessened the active participation of immigrant students in school. In particular the lack of mother-tongue assistance at preschool, combined with a fee requirement, creates an unfavorable start for many immigrant children. In fact, considering Sweden's generosity in all aspects of schooling when it comes to fees, it is surprising that pre-school education is not *gratis* (see, e.g., OECD, 2005). In addition, the National Agency for Education *points to the paradox that mother tongue instruction is nearly non-existent in special education or assimilated programmes, where immigrant children are strongly over-represented. Materials are hard to find – and mostly imported from the countries of origin.* (OECD, 2005, p.46)

Democratic Values and Participation in School and Society

Democracy is a cornerstone and founding value of the Swedish curricula and educational legislation. Fostering democracy and raising democratic citizens are principal functions of schools. However, the reality of the past two decades characterized by competition, efficiency, standardization and devolvement of responsibilities to local authorities has brought about divergent educational access and outcomes that, in turn, threaten the long tradition of equity, equality and solidarity. The social motives of education have lessened. Increased opportunities for school choice and increased residential segregation have contributed to growing disparities and differences between groups, not only in equality of access but also outcomes.

Student influence through Pupils Welfare Committees, which was once a unique feature of the Swedish democracy in the educational sector, has been negatively affected. As Arnesen & Lundahl (2006) correctly pointed out:

one may ask to what extent schools can afford pupils' democracy at a time when performance and competitiveness is a major priority. Most of the Nordic countries define citizenship education broadly, and include teaching about, for and through democracy and active participation. The double functions of fostering democratic citizens and ensuring the influence of pupils over the inner work of schools are stressed in the steering documents, perhaps more than in other countries. (p. 294)

This development in school has a definite bearing on inclusive practices as it affects involvement of all pupils in the same daily learning events. Many studies indicate that the number of special needs education pupils has increased mainly in large cities and different forms of segregated education have expanded. Dubious assessment methods and unreflective application of individual evaluation and educational plans have led to many students being viewed as derailed from the *norm* (Skolverket, 2005, and references therein). In addition, the share of Swedish pupils who fail in core subjects when leaving compulsory education and face problems finalizing their upper secondary education has increased steadily. *The number of young people who are more or less permanently left in a no-man's-land between education and work is high* (SOU, 2003, p. 92, in Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Skolverket, 2004). As more and more reports indicated that pupils were entering special educational placements within the regular school framework and in special schools, the government began financing a number of projects that will map out the processes that lead to exclusionary measures in an attempt to mitigate the situation and

therefore enhance full participation of pupils with special needs in all aspects of school life (see the projects below).

Participation and Equality of Access

A number of government financed national-level studies have recently been conducted to assess the nature, intensity and level of school participation of children and youth with disabilities. The studies are also intended to address societal or organizational issues as well as a relatively neglected research area, individual participation in the classroom. Other studies have aimed at identifying favorable factors and good examples at different educational levels that contribute to participation and equality (e.g., Bagga-Gupta, 2006; Berhanu, 2006; Eriksson, 2006; Göransson, 2008; Heimdahl Mattsson, 2006; Janson, 2006; Palla, 2006).

These studies have identified the dilemmatic and problematic nature of the term *participation*. Some of the major findings are: The concept is context bound, multidimensional and has subjective dimensions. An example of this dilemma is how adult support hinders peer relationships. That implies special teacher assistants can create barriers to social inclusion by marking the student as different and by working so closely with the pupil as to exclude other regular classroom interaction. Participation also appears to be more related to autonomy and interactions with significant others than to disability type and general environment (Eriksson, 2006). Tension exists between obtaining security in a small group with similar disabilities and the desire to be like somebody else and belong to the collective unity; at the same time there is fear that the general public has deep negative stereotypes against specific groups of people. Another aspect of the dilemmatic scenario is the need for institutionalized support as there is, at the same time, a need for individualizing and flexibility. This signifies the ties between the concept of participation and democracy. Social training and development of friendships and solidarity are equally important areas of humanity as knowledge acquisition aspects. In one recent study (Heimdahl Mattsson, 2006) the special needs students reported that in segregated settings or special units the demand put on them by the special teachers is minimal and there is generally low expectation.

The above studies have also explicated the reliability of diagnostic categories and the notion that diagnoses have important implications for educational processes. In addition, the studies underline the stigmatizing effects of diagnoses and segregated educational arrangements. On the other hand, parents exhibit a sigh of relief when their children's *problem* is diagnosed and receives a medical label (Heimdahl Mattsson, 2006). The sense of relief has also been experienced by some of the interviewed pupils in the above studies. This is also another dimension of the dilemmatic nature of categorization versus individuality.

One other study (Berhanu, 2006) linked to the above studies but focused on organizational and system level has identified eight favorable factors at organization and system levels that facilitated full integration of pupils with special needs in school life. The factors are (a) financing and resource allocation; (b) legislation, steering policies and political directives; (c) school principal attitudes, engaged involvement and knowledge; (d) collaboration, cooperation and coordination at different levels of the school system and beyond; (e) assessment and evaluation of learning outcomes; (f) social and physical set-up of the school (in-school support systems); (g) pedagogical methods, curriculum development and class-room organization; (h) professionalism, competence and in-service training on the part of the school staff; (i) parental involvement in decision-making; and (j) technical aids and curriculum adaptation.

Unfortunately, there are too few comprehensive studies that map out the level of participation and the extent of inclusiveness of disabled children in the ordinary school system in Sweden. There are too few studies that document educational inclusion in terms of comparing pupils' development in special and regular education. However, the indication (in terms of children's social and cognitive development) is in line with the international studies that show special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than students in noninclusive settings (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Peetsma, Vergeer, & Karsten, http://eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=ERICSearchResult&_urlType=action&newSearch=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=au&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=%22Roeleveld+Jaap%22 2001). Some Swedish studies have shown that inclusion has a positive effect on pupils' self-concept (e.g., Westling Allodi, 2000, 2002). This is in line with international research (Baker et al., 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

Although the situation in Sweden in terms of pupils' participation and democracy is gloomy, by Swedish standards, Sweden is still in international comparison among the few OECD countries that have maintained comprehensiveness, limited tracking at lower and upper secondary levels, that feature comparatively lower segregation, marginalisation, highly networked human rights, gender equality, and so forth. At the same time, the balance between social democratic ideals and liberal components of Swedish educational politics is far from stable at present (see, e.g., Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006).

One exemplary action in Sweden in relation to monitoring participation and inclusive/segregative processes is the recent establishment of a Forum for Inclusive Education by Örebro University and the Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education. The main goal of the forum is to enhance knowledge on inclusive and segregative processes in school and identify good examples that promote participation in the common education. As many authors (Kivirauma, Klemelä, & Rinne, 2006; Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 124 Westling Allodi, 2002, p. 50) have pointed out, this is no longer a question of compulsory education or the children's special needs, but rather, the right to participate in a common education.

The Issue of Equity, Equivalence and Equality

The purpose of this section is not to explore and analyze these three complex and overlapping concepts. It is, rather, to map out some aspects of the concepts in relation to inclusive education, the extent to which they enhance inclusiveness, and changes of their meanings in different periods of Swedish educational policymaking. Since the early nineteenth century, when elementary school was regarded as a basic school for all, equity has been and is still a central element in the Swedish educational policies, ordinances and directives. *Equity is a general term indicating fairness; for example, that principles of justice have been used in the assessment of a phenomenon* (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 307).

Equity in the school is guaranteed by the Swedish Education Act 1§2 (*The Education Act 1985:1100*) *All children and young people shall, regardless of gender, geographical residence, and social or economical situation, have equal access to education in the public school system for children and young people.* The act stipulates that consideration must also be afforded to pupils with special needs. The school has a special responsibility for those pupils who, for different reasons, experience difficulties in attaining the established educational goals. The links between education and the rest of society are widely recognized, and one task of the school system is to foster in children a spirit of equality and democratic values (LPO 94).

Swedish efforts in the past to promote equity through a variety of educational policies have been fascinating. Those early educational policies, including the macro-political agenda, focused on a social welfare model that has helped diminish the effects of differential social, cultural and economic backgrounds on outcomes. *Studies have also shown that inequalities in Swedish society have diminished over the last century in the sense that the influence of a number of background factors important for educational attainment — parents' class or social position, cultural capital, type of community and gender— have been reduced* (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 299). This may be described mainly as the result of a combination of educational policies and welfare policies that have been the central features of the cultural, historical and political heritage in Nordic societies.

The main question is how this critical equity issue can be addressed in a decentralized educational system that was introduced about 16 years ago. How can we guarantee those values without an effective system of indicators to measure and monitor equity? What does follow-up and evaluation look like? I do not claim to provide a complete description of this complex research area. I do, however, provide some examples that bear on inclusive practices both negatively and positively.

The Swedish constitution recognizes equal human worth and respect for the freedom and dignity of the individuals. The principles laid down there are sources for the curriculum's goals and objectives. In that respect,

An important principle in achieving equity has been and still is the compensatory principle, i.e., that the state should not remain neutral in issues relating to equal opportunity. Differences among geographical regions, social or economic groups must not be attributable to any form of discrimination that would indicate that the principle of equality has been neglected. (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 301)

Other than the comprehensiveness of the Swedish school system, the adult education is another crucial aspect of equity because it affords training and education for under-educated and unmotivated young people. It provides them with a chance to rejoin school as well as carry on with their working lives (OECD, 2005). Equity carries a particular significance for children with special educational needs. The majority of these children are integrated into regular child-care activities, compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools. There are, however, eight special schools for pupils with hearing/vision and physical disabilities, as well as some schools for the mentally handicapped. A total of one percent of all pupils in the compulsory and upper-secondary school levels are in such segregated settings (Skolverket, 2005; Vislie, 2003, Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001). This is minimal by international comparison (OECD, 1999a; 2000a, 2000b). Nonetheless, since the early 90s the situation has deteriorated. The number of pupils placed in educational programs for learning disabled students has increased dramatically. In general, the number of children defined as special needs has shown a steady increase. In addition, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of private schools.

Variances between schools and municipalities and student achievement including segregation and persistent socioeconomic differences among the school populations have been the postdecentralization policy phenomenon. All the indicators of the National Agency for Education compiled through evaluations, case studies and supervision, testify to this fact. This situation has gotten worse since the Conservative party took power in 2006. One may question whether decentralization and equity are *contradictory* or incompatible? One might also argue. Isn't it the conservative party that are against equity and for differentiation, as always, rather than something connected to decentralization? Decentralization is part of a policy package that increases differences in internal and external performances, but it doesn't cause them. While the influence of a number of background factors significant to educational attainment, such as parental social position, cultural capital, type of community and gender, may have diminished over the last century (Jonsson, 1993; Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001), there is a cause for concern for how long such declines will persist and caution is needed if the traditional model is to survive.

For instance, as regards average achievement, a number of studies have demonstrated that average test achievement has risen since the reform. According to Björklund et al. (2004), the achievement gain is stronger in private schools. But it is unclear whether this is attributable to the quality of the teaching or to the increased classification by ability taking place in these schools. Further, Björklund et al. use an interaction term with social background and find that, unfortunately, immigrants and low-SES pupils have not gained from the overall quality improvement – not even in absolute terms (OECD, 2005, p.20).

Evaluating Equivalence

Although the concepts of equity, equality and equivalence are inextricably intertwined, they do not convey exactly the same meaning. As I understand the concept, the term *equivalence* represents or encompasses the other two in Swedish discourses, although this is a bold statement.

Englund (2005) notes that the concept has undergone significant changes and has been given different authoritative interpretations:

Viewed from a longer-term perspective, the concept has undergone a displacement whereby its substantial meaning and the contextual criteria involved in it have changed from consisting of types of goals such as unity, common frames of reference, and equal value of continued studies, to a situation where supplementary goals have been added; these are often vague and in total opposition to the original objectives. These new goals can accept difference and individuality independently of shared frames of reference. They have also become equivalence's link to freedom of choice and parents' rights. (p. 42)

Equivalence is used, to mean *of equal worth* (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001 p. 308) and does not imply a strict criterion for comparing two objects, but does assume comparability. Educational paths, for example, can be equivalent, but do not necessarily have to contain identical courses and subjects to have the same value. In line with this, the idea of one school with a common curriculum for all can be problematic if not totally questionable. Lindensjö notes that the

reforms in Sweden have led to the insight that it is difficult to attain true equality without promoting uniformity, which in turn is seen as negative. Therefore, the term equivalence has become central in the Swedish Education Act and has thus come to replace equality

as the adjective describing the principles of equity. (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 308)

The principle of fair education as embedded in the concept of equivalence has been operationalized in the Education Act. The Education Act (Chapter1, §2) stipulates that the education provided within each type of school should be of equivalent value, irrespective of where in the country it is provided. The new curriculum (LPO 94), written under a conservative government (1991–1994), states:

National goals specify the norms for equivalence. However, equivalent education does not mean that education should be the same everywhere or that the resources of a school should be allocated equally. Accounts should also be taken of the varying circumstances and needs of pupils as well as the fact that there are a variety of ways of attaining these goals. Furthermore the school has a special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education. (p. 4)

Further, it states that education shall be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs. However, that does not mean that results should be equal. The term *quality* is also a crucial term used inseparably with the other three central terms in government reports because the quality of services at all levels of the educational system can have serious implications for equivalent education.

The performative displacement of the concept of equivalence (Englund, 2005) is significant, however, vis-à-vis the previous curriculum (LGR 80), in which an equivalent education was considered in terms of equal access to education and the possibility of creating a common frame of reference for all pupils. That is, *By applying an obligatory syllabus, which encompasses the same subjects and materials in all schools, society presents a common frame of reference as well as an equivalent education to all citizens* (LGR 80, p. 15). As the new policies incorporate supplementary goals such as increased individualization, freedom of choice, and parents' rights, achieving the goals of inclusive education become difficult. This underlines the fine balance between autonomy and communitarianism in playing out in policy discourses (see Englund, 2005).

A conceptual model of equivalence has been developed by the National Agency for Education to enable it to monitor equivalence and it is currently being applied. As shown in Table 2, this elegant model encompasses three critical areas: *equal access*, *equivalent education* and the *equal value of education*. These can also be described as *equal opportunity strategies*, *equal treatment strategies* and *equal outcome strategies*. These critical areas are structured within three general areas: prerequisites, process and results.

Table 2
Equivalence in Schools

Prerequisites	Process	Results
Equal access to education	Equivalent education education	The equal value of an education
Regardless of:	With respect to:	
Gender	Within every type of school	Further study
Geographical location	Wherever in the country	Society
Social circumstances	a school is run	Working life
Economic circumstances		

Note. Adapted from Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 310.

Equal access. Equal access includes factors such as educational options, information regarding current options, admissions and the selection process, gender, and social circumstances.

Equivalent education. Other central factors for ensuring equivalence in education include the following (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, pp. 311-312): education offered; teaching carried out in accordance with the relevant curriculum program, program targets and syllabi; sufficient time for learning; trained

staff; an effective school principal; support for students; pupil evaluation on an equal basis. The last four are central conditions to enhance inclusiveness and participation in the daily life of school.

Equal value. The following are central to the equal value of educational programmes: further study; society; working life.

It is through this indicator system that the participation and learning progress of pupils with special educational needs and culturally and socially disadvantaged segments of the school population can be monitored. A summary of the general trends according to these indicators includes the following points: growing inequalities and varied results between schools and pupils; an increase in special educational placements; and an increase in labelling of *special needs* (for instance, dysphasia, autism, ADHD, socio-emotional problems). However, there is still a huge information gap on equity in inclusive education with respect to pupils with special needs education including children with immigrant status. It is critical to include specific categories within the indicator system in order to gather information on inclusive and exclusionary processes and on the participants, in particular within the regular education system.

Furthermore, the term *equivalence* is highly problematic. (Note that the language as it is used in Swedish language is also another problem. Space does not allow me here to delve into the semantics and linguistic discourses). What I gather from the literature is that some scholars advocate conceiving the term as a notion that encompasses both equity and equality. This discourse might lead to the possibility of accepting segregation from a common or collective identity—much like the U.S. history around *separate but equal*. The usage of the term requires close scrutiny as it has serious implications on how we conceive and implement inclusive education. Although there is little discussion in the literature about the term's hidden or tacit message, I presume that this application of the term might strengthen the *separate but equal* discourse. This could be one reason why progress in Sweden, with regard to inclusive education, has slowed over the past few years despite positive policies and intentions at different levels of the education system (see Persson, 2008).

Evaluation and Assessment: Learning Outcomes

The new grading system that came into force in 1994 has also been a source of debate about equity in Sweden (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001). According to this system, grades are to be given according to nationally formulated criteria denoting certain qualities of knowledge and skills corresponding to the syllabus for a given subject. The possible grades are: pass; pass with distinction; and pass with special distinction. When a student in compulsory school fails to meet the criteria of the syllabus, no grade is given; in upper secondary school, the grade fail is given. The criteria, however, are to be based on curricula and syllabi, without reference to the accomplishments of a pupil's peers. This system of grading is referred to as absolute in comparison with its predecessor, a relative system, in which grades were awarded on a Gauss curve denoting the normal performance for a given age group of pupils. The possible grades had been 1,2,3,4 and 5, with 5 denoting the best performance. (p.303)

Issues of accountability as described above (and coordinated by the National Agency for Education) are exerting some pressures on schools to document not only equal access and equivalent education, but also effectiveness in terms of outcomes. This emphasis on accountability represents a significant shift from issues of access and quality of services. Systems of assessment, monitoring, evaluation and documentation of effectiveness in terms of learning outcomes and equity in inclusive education remain lacking and need attention (see Peters, 2003, for a similar observation on the experiences of the counties of the North).

Sweden has very few examinations, grades or certificates in comparison with many other countries in Europe. Until recently no grades were awarded for subjects before 8th or 9th grade in the compulsory school. At the end of comprehensive education, tests are mandatory in Swedish, English and mathematics. However, at upper secondary levels, tests are compulsory in the first course of study in core subjects. Generally, teacher assessments are viewed as having higher validity values than tests (OPEC, 2005). This limited use of testing and grading is commendable; however, the culture of testing has entered the school system and the new government is pushing for more nationally administered tests even at lower grades such as third grade. Currently the assessment system has reached a crossroad concerning whether or not formative-summative assessment should be or could be combined. The tension is fresh at the time of writing this paper. The impact of this decision on inclusive practices is obvious.

The state changed its role from steering by rules to steering by goals and results. This goal-directed management reform, which replaced the Regel (rule) system, confines the state's role to formulating general *goals* to be achieved by each local government, and local governments have sole responsibility for carrying out the activities. That gives local governments a free hand to achieve the goals through different means, strategies and *cultures*, such as consensus, political compromises, and pragmatic solutions embedded in obscure messages. This would appear to usher us into not only *variant* educational processes, outcomes and procedural/ institutional cultures in variant municipalities, but also into confusion and erosion in terms of educational visions such as equity and equality of educational opportunities, including specific philosophies such as inclusive education, mainstreaming, and *a school for all*.

While there are signs that inclusive education as envisaged in the Salamanca declaration is being exercised at different levels, gaps in research and follow-ups are most noticeable in this area. Finally, an overrepresentation of minority pupils in special educational placements (Berhanu, 2008) and significant gender differences in specific disability categories (Skolverket, 2005), as well as in general learning outcomes and methods of testing and assessment, are areas of grave concern requiring further studies.

Democracy is a fundamental value of the Swedish society. Democracy in itself does not guarantee inclusiveness. The principles governing democratic processes are important. As a result, we encounter different models of democracy, although representative democracy is basic and shared by differing models, whether law-governed democracy (the New Right) or participatory/deliberative democracy (the New Left). *The former stems from the liberal tradition and the latter from a Marxian, pluralistic tradition* (Held, 1997, in Nilholm, 2006b, p. 440). Law-governed democracy puts the individual at the centre, minimizing the impact of the state on public life (ibid.). Low-governed democracy appears to be the order in Sweden, although not in its extreme form. There are already signs, however, that this is becoming detrimental to the goals of inclusion.

Before summarizing my analysis, I would like to go back to the six questions/dilemmas I outlined in the Introduction. Do we have answers to them? These questions do not have simple answers. The answer may lie partly in how we conceive social justice. It has been indicated earlier that the justification for inclusive education is based in part on the ideals of social justice and that the social justice goals and inclusive education are inextricably intertwined. However, social justice views in inclusion discourses vary. *Social justice views can be classified as individualistic or communitarian; both perspectives permeate the discourses on inclusion* (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006, p. 262). The authors argue that we must move from a traditional social justice discourse in inclusive education (individualistic/communitarian) to a transformative model of social justice. The values involved relate to a vision of a whole society, of which education is a part. Issues of social justice, equity and choice are central to the demands for inclusive education. This vision concerns the well-being of all pupils, and making schools welcoming institutions through, for instance, measures examining ideological and historical assumptions about difference, critiquing marginalization, debunking merit based cultures, deliberating/negotiating program's goals, tools and practices, and so on (Artiles et al., 2006). I also believe that a fundamental change in our educational system and *core of educational practice* may mitigate the dilemmas. As Elmore (1996) succinctly put it, this core of practice includes:

How teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student's role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and classwork. The core also includes structural arrangements of schools, such as the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, teachers' responsibilities for groups of students, and relations among teachers in their work with students, as well as processes for assessing student learning and communicating it to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other interested parties. (p. 23)

It might also be argued that the dilemma of difference in education calls for *resolutions, not solutions*. *They require the balancing of tensions, accepting less than ideal ways forward, and working positively with uncertainties and complexities* (Norwich, 2007, p. 124).

Finally, despite some mixed findings as to the *result* of inclusive education and the tensions between the theory of inclusive education and its practice, research has, as a whole, demonstrated that on a number of levels inclusive education is preferable to segregation. Recent studies have shown that special needs pupils in inclusive settings have made greater academic progress. It is not only that students make good

progress in an inclusive setting but also that inclusive education compared with segregated settings results in more positive social relationships. These provide all students with enhanced opportunities to learn from each other's contributions. Studies also demonstrate that inclusive educational arrangements are beneficial for students without disabilities (see Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006, for some of the research literature on this topic).

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to map out the challenges and responses to inclusive education in Sweden, in particular at organizational and systemic levels from a cultural historical point of view. Core concepts such as equity, equality, and equivalence that have bearing on inclusive education have been discussed. The analysis incorporates government reports and research findings and has been conceptualized in terms of the assumption that policy and practice decisions involve dilemmas and contradictions and are situated in a historical, social and cultural context. That holds true for policies and practices of education in general and special/inclusive education in particular.

Equity in education has been a principal policy concern in Sweden for several decades. In this paper I have discussed the status of equity in Swedish policies, including the importance of reform of the education system in this regard, and have explained how Swedish follow-up and indicator systems are structured to monitor equity and variability in the system.

Sweden is a wealthy, highly-educated and healthy society with one of the highest standard of living in the world. In comparison to even many well-developed countries, Sweden is one of the leading countries at successfully combining equity and social inclusion with high economic efficiency. The tradition of universalism and comprehensiveness with minimization of streaming and tracking has been the hallmark of the Swedish education system. Redistribution policies underpinned by high levels of taxation and public spending still appear to have strong social consensus. Sweden has, at the same time, undergone a dramatic transformation within the past two decades. The changes are framed within neo-liberal philosophies that place greater emphasis on devolution, marketization (driven by principles of cost containment and efficiency), competition, standardization, individual choices and rights, development of new profiles within particular school units, and other factors that potentially work *against* the values of diversity, equity and inclusion.

National evaluations and OECD reports indicate that differences in a number of aspects (e.g., socioeconomic, educational achievements and resources) have increased between schools and municipalities, as well as among pupils. Differences in achievement can be linked to the new goals and an achievement-referenced operating system. The number of children who are placed in special educational settings and in particular in Särskolan (education for learning disabled pupils) has increased. The proportions of students who fail in core subjects when leaving compulsory schools and students who drop out from upper secondary schools have increased. Increased segregation by place of residence, variation in classification and placement decisions of pupils with special needs (diverging local practices), a proliferation of independent schools, class differences, individual choices, marginalization, exclusion, and other factors have been documented and have become a subject of heated debate during the last few years. In particular, *growing ethnic inequalities are probably the Achilles heel of the present-day Swedish education system* (OECD, 2005, p. 47).

The paradox is that all these trends that work against inequity are happening while at the same time the rhetoric advocating a school for all and inclusive education have become policy catch-words while having very little effect on the ground. As Skidmore (2004) observed, based on his experiences in the U.K., inclusion has become a buzzword in educational discourse. Although inclusion has been adopted as a policy goal, to date much of the Swedish debate has amounted to little more than the trading of abstract ideological positions, which has little connection with the daily realities in schools. In practice, the trend may be described as *excluding the included*.

As a consequence of massive immigration, the education system has come under serious pressure during the past two decades. This rapid demographic change has brought with it ethnic segregation and inequalities, which presents a major challenge to policymakers in terms of social integration generally, and educational inclusion specifically, unless *targeted positive discriminatory* measures are put in place. Such measures, however, are anathema to Swedish policy principles.

Responses and challenges to inclusive education in general and issues of equity in inclusive education are varied and complex. Sweden's cultural and political heritage could have been ideal to fully implement inclusive education as envisaged in The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). However, the new political movements and policies that dominate the Swedish educational system have created contradictory and conflicting realities that work not only against fundamental equity issues but also against the long Swedish tradition of universalism, comprehensiveness and egalitarianism.

The challenge in Sweden is to meet these changes and still guarantee equivalence in the education system. Sweden has developed a broad follow-up system and quality indicators in order to monitor changes within the system. However, the indicator systems do not specifically show the nature, extent and processes of inclusive and exclusionary processes within the regular system. Since a return to the former centralized management system is unlikely, constant flow of monitoring, evaluation and inspection and a stronger partnership between the central system and the local level, and even parents and schools, as well as between municipalities, must be established in order to mitigate *variance* and *inequalities*. Stronger central government authority over educational priority funding will be critical for at-risk groups, either in the form of targeted central budgets, or in terms of regulatory power over municipal education outlays (OECD, 2005).

Core concepts shift meanings across time and context. For instance the concept of equivalence has been linked with freedom of choice and education as a civil right (the rights of pupils/parents). This contrasts with the tradition of uniformity, which has been more closely associated with the idea of education as a social right (Englund, 2005). Because of its positive connotations, the concept of inclusion is being appropriated and relocated in other fields through recontextualization. The risk is clear unless unambiguous policy statements are made.

Apart from the obvious policy shifts that brought about contradictions in the education system, the very nature of our humanity and social activities also are filled with some dilemmas and contradictions. However, policies and practices can either strengthen or weaken the complexities emanating from this. The dilemmas revolve around individually and collectively based ideas of democracy, categorization (social stigmatization/segmentation) versus individuality, utility and culture, the public and personal domains, economy and welfare, individual agency versus collective action, autonomy and communitarianism.

A number of government funded studies have been conducted recently to investigate the participation and inclusion of disabled pupils at different levels of the education system, in particular at individual, classroom and school levels, and conferences are being held linked to these studies. There is therefore some hope that the studies will reveal micro- and meso-level activities that hinder or enhance full participation of students with special needs and *problematize* further real-world dilemmas, including the growing culture of diagnosis. Significant factors that may facilitate physical, social and curricular inclusion have been identified: competent personnel, differentiation in the curriculum, favorable assessment methods, collaboration between the teaching staff, class size, involvement by school leadership, continuous and intensive in-service staff training, partnership with parents, and economic factors. Moreover, the concept of participation has to be further *problematized*. It is one of the least empirically defined core concepts and is broadly misconceived. It is complex, multidimensional, subjective, and context bound.

On the positive side, there are still commendable activities and policies in Sweden that promote social inclusion. For instance, the system offers a possibility for youngsters who fail at some stage to move on into further education via individual or tailored programs. A generous school system guarantees free education (including free books, meals and transportation to the nearest school) for all in compulsory education. Free access is also guaranteed in state-run higher education and in municipal adult education (<http://www.skolverket.se>). Acclaiming Sweden's past achievements, an OECD report has stated that *the tools to achieve equity in Sweden have not been added as corrections to the education system – they are at the heart of the Swedish model*. That model includes

- (1) a strong, popular and successful preschool combining care, nurture and education
- (2) a well-designed, broad and attractive comprehensive curriculum
- (3) an encouraging and non-threatening learning culture for all
- (4) opportunities for bridges and second chance provision at all levels
- (5) absence of dead ends

- (6) equivalence of qualifications, and
 (7) a long-standing tradition of democratic adult education (OECD, 2005, p. 48-49).

There is, however, a cause for concern for how long Sweden's positive reputation will persist given the drastic changes that have taken place within a short span. Caution is needed if the traditional model is to survive.

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Author Note

A shorter/brief version of this paper appears in Elizabeth Kozleski and Alfredo Artiles (Eds.). (in press). *Equity in Inclusive Education*. Arizona State University.