

Inclusive Education and the “Balkanization” Professionalization of the Specialized Field of Studies in Special Education Postgraduate Programs: The Case of Sweden

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Abstract

This short paper has two pronged purposes. The first is to reflect on policies and practices of inclusive education in Sweden and the second is to problematize the implications of the continuous proliferation of the specialized field of studies in Special Education postgraduate programs in Sweden. The current Swedish political and educational discourses reflect contradictions and dilemmas among varied dimensions of the educational arena. Policy and practice decisions involve dilemmas. Sweden may be characterized by an embodiment of 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, the country 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 (Berhanu, 2011, 2016). The second concern of this paper is: Does the current specialization or diversified form of studies within Special Education postgraduate programs (Teacher Training Programs) support the inclusive agenda, or does it hamper the vision? In addition, recent developments to create new categories or subcategories of special education have the potential not only to tie up administrative and diagnostic resources but also to create an increasingly less manageable array of separate special education programs. This Balkanization process with regard to a number of select disorders has advantages and disadvantages. My concern is that the very existence of “highly specialized knowledge domains” may result in a new form of exclusion and segregation. This is a scenario that one can imagine or expect with the proliferation or balkanization of specialized studies in numerous strands unless we plan carefully as to how to utilize these skills and expertise within inclusive settings.

The Notion of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is widely discussed, debated, and applied in varied arrangements in Sweden as in many other countries. The debate has a long history both internationally and nationally (see, e.g., Kaufman, 1989 Kaufman & Hallahan, 1995; Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton) The two extremes of the debates along a continuum, are those who view inclusion as a policy driven by an unrealistic expectation and that “trying to force all students into the inclusion mold is just as coercive and discriminatory as trying to force all students into the mold of a special education class or residential institution” and, on the other hand, those who view strongly that students/pupils belong in the regular educational arrangement and competent teachers are expected to meet the needs of all pupils regardless of what those needs may be (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016; Corbett & Slee, 2000; Mock & Kauffman, 2005; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

There is minimal consensus as to what the concept is and is not. 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*. I would dare say that the message of inclusive education as outlined in the Salamanca statement has just 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. Despite or, rather, because of the inflated discourses of inclusion and revamping of inclusion policies, the practice is often short of advocacies.

Oxymoronic and Paradoxical Nature of the Inclusive Agenda

Education is a basic right for all citizens in Sweden. School communities must be inclusive of all children regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, creed, gender, or ethnicity. Schools should also recognize the unique contributions that children with special needs make to community life. With this basic tenet in mind, Sweden has adopted inclusive education as a guiding principle to guarantee equality of access in education to all as well as part of a human rights approach to social relations. 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 is concerned with the well-being of all pupils and with making schools welcoming institutions (Skollag (1985:1100; Skollag (2010:800; Berhanu, 2016).

In their analysis of inclusive education in Sweden and Germany, Sansoura and Bernhard (2017) rightly concluded that that the Swedish system has a different understanding about how to support children with learning difficulties to prevent discrimination. These students can receive support without being diagnosed. This leads to a discussion of how to secure resources to support children in a proactive manner. Classifying a child as different from others may, on one hand,

secure sufficient resources and provide equal opportunities. On the other hand, diagnosing special needs may increase the risk of discrimination and may foster social exclusion. “It is important, therefore, to scrutinize all categorization systems carefully, asking questions about whose interests are being served in the identification of difference, and whether the life chances of particular groups of children are being enhanced or diminished as a result” (European Union, NESSE report, 2012: 25). It is important, therefore, to scrutinize all categorization systems carefully, asking questions about whose interests are being served in the identification of difference, and whether the life chances of particular groups of children are being enhanced or diminished as a result” (European Union, NESSE report, 2012: 25).

During the latter part of the 1960s to the early 1970s, special education expanded and one could see that about 20% of students did not perform well (Nilholm & Björck-Åkesson, 2007). It turned out also that special education became *too costly* for the state. The situation forced the government to set up an inquiry committee. After a detailed investigation into the inner workings of schools by the inquiry committee (SOU [Swedish Government Official Report], 1974:53), the concept of mainstreaming was introduced. Class teachers were now faced with the requirement to deal with diversity of students in their class and thus adapt teaching to pupils' differing abilities and needs. Teachers would take care of several students who previously had special education support. When the curriculum Lgr 80 (curriculum for the compulsory school) came into being, it was stressed with even greater force that the services of the school should be adapted to the individual student's abilities and that the school would work proactively to prevent the onset of school difficulties. Special education as an organizational form was not mentioned in the curriculum. This curriculum's hallmark was a “school for all.”(cf. Emanuelsson, 1998; Emanuelsson et al., 2001)

Alexadou et al. (2016:13) argue that the last 40 years have seen great political attention paid to issues of inclusion in education, both from international organizations and also individual nations. This flexible concept has been adopted enthusiastically in education reforms concerned with increased standardization of teaching and learning, decentralization of education management, reduced teacher autonomy, and marketization of school systems. A number of educational reforms have been devised and implemented in Sweden, especially in the 1990s [and even up until now], the consequences of which have yet to be properly mapped out and evaluated. The reforms revolve around the political management of schools, including a decentralization of school management that empowers municipalities to be in charge of school affairs within their jurisdiction. Marginalization and segregation of socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups has increased. Resultant resource differences have widened among schools and municipalities and among pupils. 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 catchwords. 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* (Berhanu, 2011; Berhanu & Dyson, 2012).

Göransson et al. (2011) analyzed and critically discussed current policy and practices at various levels of Sweden's compulsory school system for pupils in need of special support and pupils with disabilities. They argue that, "a rather complex picture emerges from this analysis. Several conclusions are made: (1) state policies leave a lot of room for interpretation at the municipal and school levels, and this results in an extensive variation; (2) Swedish state policy is not as inclusive as is often stated; (3) celebration of difference seems to be hard to achieve; (4) learning goals can be a double-edged sword with regard to inclusion; and (5) most pupils appear to enjoy participation in school, and in an international perspective, Swedish classrooms seem to be largely democratic" (p. 541).

Special Education as a Profession and/or Occupation: The Growing Demand for Specialized Fields of Study in Teacher Training Programs

Although at this stage, there is lack of comparative data available on special needs students' school performance, knowledge gains, graduation rates, preparation for post-secondary schooling, work life or satisfaction/attitude/feelings based on their placement in segregated settings, non-inclusive versus inclusive arrangements, the existing sporadic evidences that exist in Sweden indicate a positive trend; but caution is needed not to jump into making conclusive statements on the benefits or disadvantages of inclusive settings. We have yet to conduct a meta-analysis and a number of reviews on the academic and social outcomes of special needs students (Sonnander, Emanuelsson, & Kebbon, 1993).

Because of a growing number of young people leaving school without a full education, subsequent policy measures came up, with a completely new approach to special education as a field of knowledge and profession. A motive was that the adaptation of mainstream education in schools should work better so that fewer students would need special education. Consequently, the dominant individual-based and medically oriented approach to school problems was replaced largely by the system-based approach (or school- or context-based approach) with regard to school difficulties. In practice, the policy change led to the introduction of the profession, Special Pedagogues (Special Educators), whose functions were more than just teaching pupils with special needs but also working at the organizational level in helping teachers to include pupils with special needs and to help meet their needs within regular school/class settings so that fewer students would need special education in a segregated setting. These special Pedagogues [as opposed to Special Teachers] are entrusted with the responsibilities to serve mainly as mentors and advisors for colleagues who have special needs pupils/students in their classes. They also conduct school improvement tasks as well as teach students with the greatest problems in school. In the beginning of the 1990s, a Special Educator Program mentioned above was launched that would have significant impact on the praxis of special/inclusive education in Sweden. The program 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 program was well under way until 10 years ago. Then, a new conservative government came into power and “discredited” it.

In 2008, the government reinstated a special teacher program in which trainees will be expected upon completion to work directly with individual pupils (the programs are: Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training with specialization in Intellectual Disabilities; Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training with specialization in the Development of Language, Writing, and Reading; Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training with specialization in Mathematical Development). The focus will therefore be the student, not the system, a dramatic shift from the previous perspective. Currently both programs exist side-by-side, are offered at an advanced level, comprise 90 credits, 1-1/2 years of full-time study, and qualify graduates for specialist tasks in schools. The new Special Education Teachers should be able to analyze school difficulties at the individual level in different learning environments and be able to *personalize* the school activities. The vision from the government's side is now that equivalence is strengthened through early identification/detection and interventions for students in need of special education and individualized support measures. Special needs education (SNE) in Sweden: Pupils in need of special support have the right to specialist provision. Special support shall be given to pupils who have difficulties in completing their education successfully. If a pupil needs special support, an action plan shall be drawn up. The regulations regarding plans for pupils in need of special support have been further clarified. The pupil's need is to be assessed and the subsequent action plan shall contain information regarding the pupil's needs, what measures will be taken and how these measures will be followed up and evaluated. All education corresponds as far as possible to national curriculums, but with the emphasis upon meeting individual learning needs. Approximately 14 per cent of the pupils in compulsory mainstream schools have an action plan (2013). The action plan is decided by the principal. In a few circumstances, this provision is offered in special programmes, e.g. special needs schools with sign language communication are available for pupils with severe hearing impairments, and a special programme is offered to pupils with learning disabilities. The pupils' needs are assessed by a multi-disciplinary team. Medical, social, psychological and pedagogical tests are carried out. Once the statement has been completed, the pupil is allowed to attend these special programmes. Attending a special programme or a special needs school is voluntary. If the pupil does not choose to attend a special programme or a special needs school, the pupil attends the mainstream school with support and an action plan. (<https://www.spsm.se/om-oss/english/the-swedish-education-system/laws-and-rights-in-swedish-schools/special-needs-education-sne-in-sweden/>). From school authorities, the importance of special education expertise of all categories of teachers is strongly emphasized. The tricky question is whether this trend enhances or hinders the inclusive school agenda that the government itself set as a goal. All these changes have implications on the process of differentiation, individualization, segregation, and categorization.

Specialized Field of Studies: Implications for Inclusive Education

This brings us to the second point of the paper: Do these specializations or diversified studies within special education postgraduate programs support the inclusive agenda? Alternatively, do they hamper the vision? This is a complex question. It is critical that schools aimed at more

inclusive practices take the time necessary to plan effectively how they use the resources of the new graduates. Genuine inclusion involves restructuring of a school's entire program and requires constant assessment of practices and results on how to use the special education knowledge. Research that is more comprehensive must be done in this regard, as inclusion can easily be hijacked. Constant appraisal of our schools is important to create occupationally competent, socially adequate, and happy citizens.

A quick look in Sweden's degree program in special education at advanced levels reveals that there are many specialized courses and programs focused on specific groups of students. In addition, recent developments to create new categories or subcategories of special education have the potential not only to tie up administrative and diagnostic resources but also to create an increasingly less manageable array of separate special education programs. This Balkanization process with regard to a number of select disorders has advantages and disadvantages. My concern is that the very existence of specialized knowledge domains may result in a new form of exclusion and segregation. For instance, self-contained classes for neuropsychiatric disorders; self-contained classes with specialized academic instruction for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities; self-contained classes or special school forms for the "gifted"; self-contained classes with specialized academic instruction for students with moderate to severe disabilities; self-contained classes with specialized academic instruction for students with severe social-emotional and behavioral needs; self-contained classes with specialized academic instruction for students on the autism spectrum and/or with severe language disorders. A Swedish government (Regeringskansliet, 2017) has recently passed a bill that requires post graduate studies in special education to include modules which incorporate Neuropsychiatric Disabilities (Neuropsykiatriska funktionsnedsättningar NPF). Adhd, autism and Tourette's syndrome are some of the most common neuropsychiatric disabilities. Education on neuropsychiatric disabilities (NPF), such as ADHD, autism spectrum conditions (formerly known as Asperger's syndrome) or Tourette's syndrome, becomes mandatory for all students who will be educated as specialist teachers and special educators. The argument is that people with these disabilities have different *cognitions*, that is, they think and perceive information in different ways and experience and process sensory impressions in different ways.

These are scenarios that one can imagine with the proliferation or balkanization of specialized studies in numerous strands unless we plan carefully as to how to utilize these skills and expertise within inclusive settings. The confluence of factors that has hastened this — the balkanization, specialization, including the diagnostic culture—growth and popularity, particularly in specialized, high-need areas, should be carefully investigated. It is also high time to deepen our understanding of the efficacy of the various approaches and programs and of the process and outcome variables used to assess program impact, particularly in relation to the inclusive agenda as stipulated in the Salamanca statement.

A preliminary result compiled by Barow, Bernhard, and Berhanu (2017 ongoing research) indicates credentials are at the core of the postgraduate study in special education. A number of students used the metaphor of a *toolbox* concerning the expected encounters with professional challenges. The students expect better job opportunities, new professional challenges, and

increasing competences to work in diversified settings and with diverse groups. My observation is also that more and more advocacy groups (including parent groups) are emerging demanding separate specialized high-quality school settings.

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