

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE SCANDINAVIAN
WELFARE STATE**

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OBSTACLES, DILEMMAS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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**STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL
COLLABORATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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Introduction

¹The Scandinavian nations have by tradition a reputation as leading countries in the endeavour to create comprehensive education for all pupils. During the post war period schools' responsibility towards children and youth with school-related difficulties have become increasingly emphasized. Pioneers like Bengt Nirje and Niels Erik Bank-Mikkelsen (see e.g. Flynn and Nitsch, 1980) contributed to this development and may be seen as fathers of what has been denominated 'the normalization principle'.

In all three countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, education during the last two hundred years have come to play an important role in society. Earlier schools' responsibility was firstly to guarantee a Christian upbringing for the rising generation while the family should provide for their profane education. A chosen few went to school and a future career in higher education – society of that time needed only a small number of citizens with formal education.

At that time education in all three countries should in principle be available for all children. But this was far from reality – many children were denied schooling because of low talent. Others were kept at home as their families needed their labour.

During the last decades of the 19th century schools became more theoretically oriented which in turn put heavier demands upon pupils to perform well. Slow learners were an obstacle to "normal" pupils and discussions how to deal with this problem were animated. Special schools and special classes were set up for these pupils for mainly two reasons;

- slow learners were supposed to learn better together with like-minded
- teachers wanted to get rid of pupils whose presence posed a threat to mainstream teaching

Not surprisingly the first reason came to constitute the official discourse – a discourse that lead to a dramatic expansion of special schools and remedial classes in the early 20th century.

¹ Thanks to professor Peder Haug and professor Niels Egelund who have contributed to the original version of this paper.

This debate took place not only in Scandinavia but maybe it was more intense here not least because of a forum for educational development – Nordic Teachers’ meeting - and debate that was established as early as 1870². One of the most controversial issues discussed was that of differentiation within the classroom and ability-grouping. Advocates *for* early distribution of pupils into different schools or classes argued that

- Low-achieving pupils feel more comfortable and learn better when grouped with peers of similar ability
- High-achieving pupils develop and maintain interest and incentive in homogenous groups
- Teachers find it easier to teach and manage homogenous classes.

Advocates *against* separation of slow learners claimed that schools had no right to send these children away and compared special schools to penitentiaries. Interestingly enough this debate seems to be never-ending and as vivid today as it was a hundred years ago.

Integration and democratisation of education

In contrast to Sweden, Norway and Denmark suffered from foreign occupation during World war II. This gave Sweden an advantage in building the post-war society and held out many advantages and possibilities to restructure and reform the public sector including education. The incremental³ and cautious political strategies that was characteristic of the 1930- and 40’s were replaced by a technocratic era where belief in the future and strong reliance upon technical solutions to complex problems dominated.

Belief in the future and optimism typical of the first post war decade was turned into a deep critique against the prevailing conditions in the early 1960’s. The traditional social reproduction remained and the new compulsory school proved to have difficulties to break that pattern. Despite far-reaching economic investments in education in all three countries the

² These meetings attracted great many participants. At the meeting in Göteborg 1880 5227 teachers and educationalists participated – 3080 Swedes, 670 Norwegians, 1273 Danes and 204 Fins (Svensk Läraretidning, 1895).

³ With reference to Lindensjö and Lundgren (2000) Persson 2003 describes how Swedish special education was developed and established from the early 1930’s up to the late 1990’s. The terms used to describe his period is ‘incremental’, ‘consensualistic’, ‘technocratic’ and ‘participatory’.

goal to create a new school where the needs of all pupils could be met appeared to be far away.

Integration became the solution of how schooling for children with disabilities should be organised. The implementation of a school for all implied that in principle all children should become enrolled in the new nine-year compulsory school. This ambition, however was subjected to criticism not least from special school staff and parents' organisations who feared that their children would suffer from lack of care in the ordinary school. The crucial question was whether or not segregated education in special schools was preferable to integrated education in ordinary schools. The debate was charged with emotions and based on radically different ways of understanding how to create the best solutions for disabled children.

A new era

The transition from the 1980's to -90's represents a political change of principle in the Scandinavian countries. This change occurs on different occasions, is connected to different political parties and develops in different ways. The period is characterized by comparatively many common factors, above all when it comes to the complexity of this development. The educational scene becomes hard to grasp and things seems not to be connected in any transparent way. This gives rise to a series of conflicts and dilemmas, typical for the spirit of that time which seems to be a consequence of the fact that different groups of people with divergent interests turn up on the scene simultaneously. But these more and more uncovered conflicts are also an effect of globalization and internationalization which resulted in countries becoming even more dependent upon each other.

Politically there is a direction towards neo-liberalism and New Public Management becomes the answer to the new demands for governance and administration. This occurs in politics generally but becomes perhaps most pronounced in education where privatization, competition, ranking and measurement make up the new prestige words.

Individualization

A new educational field of interest that came up from this political reorientation was the requirement for a more individual adaptation of teaching and instruction. Schools' responsibility for taking all learners' qualifications and needs into consideration became

strongly emphasized. This principle, however, was formulated far earlier under the term differentiation or individualization. And can in Norway be derived from the national curricula for elementary schools in 1939. In Denmark specifications in the 1993 School act made it clear that the needs of each pupil should be essential and in Sweden the introduction of individual educational plans for pupils with school-related difficulties in the 1980's and from 2006 for all pupils, represent the new individualistic era. In Norway adapted teaching constitutes the main element in the 2006 educational reform. The reason for this is the belief that lack of adaptation of instruction to pupils' preconditions is the primary cause of poor academic performance in schools.

As mentioned above, the renewed interest in individuality at the cost of collectivism is connected with an ideological change towards neo liberalism and seems to appear in all political parties in the 1990's. Research also supports the opinion that schools to a low degree have focused the individual pupils. In all three countries results from research has shown that schools to a high extent seem to be bound in their own traditions rather than focusing single pupils.

This kind of understanding has brought about the belief that differentiation i.e. matching of work to the differing capabilities of individuals to extend their learning, is the solution to pupils' feelings of discomfort and poor results. Special education, in turn, would thus become less necessary as a complement to regular education. The individual approach is a distinctive feature of special education and the same has been characteristic of the special educational knowledge on the whole. An increased focus upon individualization could thus be interpreted as a change in the direction of acceptance of a higher degree of heterogeneity between pupils.

This development, however, is not solely positive. An evaluation carried out by the Swedish Agency for Education in 1998 indicated that the more emphasized individual orientation in schools brought about pupils to work at different levels with prefabricated tasks at the cost of dialogue and social interaction (Skolverket, 1999). Especially slow learners tended to be paid little attention and spent considerable time waiting for help from the teacher. The evaluation showed that many pupils appeared to have difficulties working independently and to take the responsibility for their own learning. Waiting for guidance and help from the teacher often led to passivity. An accentuation on individual work brings about deprivation of social relations and exchange of views with peers, phenomena that are essential for learning and personal

development. The sad thing about this is that children who have difficulties become more affected of this lack of social interaction than do other children. Thus there is a tension between collectivism and individualism which must be paid attention to in the striving for an inclusive school.

The expectations of a more articulated individual approach to learning and teaching in schools appear at the same time as the concept 'inclusive education' is introduced. Within a special educational discourse this concept is used in a certain way and deals principally about how schools can adapt their work to the group of pupils who have been referred to special education. But inclusive education should be defined broader than that. It is a matter of how the education system (and society in its entirety) could become accessible for all people.

The fact that inclusive education and a more individualistic approach to teaching and learning are introduced fairly simultaneously in the Scandinavian countries is worth attention.

Individualization is no doubt a component (not to say a requirement) of inclusive education. At the same time there appears to be a built-in opposition between the new forms of individual work mentioned earlier, and demands for inclusion. It is not self-evident that these two lines of development fit together if the individualistic part gets too much space – something which has not been analysed and discussed particularly much. The concept of inclusion, as described in specialist literature or official documents, clearly involves pupils to be given opportunities to realize their abilities and interests within the scope of their aptitude. But it is schools' responsibility to see to that this self-realization takes place within a social context where democratic values constitute the frame-work and participation is based on solidarity, equality and respect.

The ideas behind inclusion

Inclusive education, thus, signifies explicit demands, expectations and obligations when it comes to the relationship between the individual and the collective⁴. This is not necessarily the case when teaching and instruction build upon individual adaptation solely. The dilemma seems to derive from the impracticability to promote the individual to the same extent as the

⁴ Interestingly an intense debate started in England 2005 initiated by Baroness Warnock, the leader of the Warnock committee in the 70's. In her new report Special educational needs: A new look, Warnock claims that 'inclusion can be ... carried too far' and further: '...governments must come to recognise that even if inclusion is an ideal for society in general, it may not always be an ideal for school.' (p. 43)

collective. Something has to become superior and the way the concept 'inclusion' has been established and used, consideration for the collective is more important than for the individual. Or, expressed otherwise, consideration for any individual is something that is to be safeguarded within the collective. The emphasis upon individualization during the last decade has however defused the significance of being together in favour of self-fulfilment.

Another challenge concerning the concept inclusion is the notable circumstance that it seems to be reserved to and a responsibility of special education. A survey of the literature on inclusion and inclusive education reveals that these issues seem to be of interest almost without exception to special education. A probable consequence of this tendency may be that general education does not need to engage in issues concerning *all* pupils in school. Neither will general education become involved in such processes of change that will be necessary if schools are to become accessible for a larger number of pupils. When words such as restructuring or reformation are used in connection with inclusion, one important reason is that the whole field of school activities and all pupils will be involved. This constitutes perhaps the most important difference between inclusion and integration – integration engaged with enrolling a larger number of pupils in general schooling while inclusion is more about how to create an 'inclusive and accessible society where schools represent a vital component.

To sum up, there is a risk in handing over the issue of inclusive education to the relatively few professionals who work within the field of special education. If this group alone becomes accountable for the implementation and accomplishment of inclusion in schools, the prospects of change may be negligible.

Segregation by request

Historically special education has been associated with the incidence of segregating measures either in special schools or as special classes or groups. Up to the present the trend has been that of a decrease of the prevalence of segregation but this trend now seems to have come to an end. One explanation of this may be that those pupils not enrolled in ordinary schools now is so small and complicated to work with, that segregated instruction is seen as the only

possibility. Another, more unpleasant explanation may be that the support for inclusive education has become more and more questioned.

The renewed interest in segregation is intimately connected to what solution may be best for the individual pupil. Not surprisingly parents' organizations often argue for special education in segregated settings as a kind of safeguard against unqualified and parsimonious education. The increasing focus upon cost effectiveness, freedom of choice, comparability and accountability has brought about disinclination to spend money on pupils whose prospects of contributing to economical growth is limited. Often an instrumental utilitarianism dominates legitimated by more or less vague diagnoses or statements.

The idea behind arguments *against* traditional and segregating special education was that belonging in a fellowship is of fundamental importance and a basis for personal development. What is best for the collective, how individuals conduce to the whole are issues practically absent in today's debate. This development leads to damping down solidarity between groups of pupils. Instead individual performance becomes prioritised and less attention is paid to individual pupils' duties and liabilities against others. This in turn constitutes the basis for discussions about the individual's right to go to his or her neighbourhood school instead of attending a special schools far away from home. Segregation seems to return to favour – in Sweden through maintenance of special schooling for pupils with intellectual disabilities, in Denmark through increasing enrolment of pupils in special schools. It is more difficult to describe the Norwegian trends as special schools often are camouflaged as resource centres.

What about the future?

Is it possible to say something about the future of special education on the basis of the development in the three countries up till now? It seems obvious that the development so far has been lined with difficulties, political and strategic maneuvers and struggles for a more just society. The struggle for inclusion in Scandinavia has engaged different groups of people; professionals, parents, politicians and administrators. Individuals and organisations have fought a hard battle for their interests, and the results have not been easily won. Also in the future the development for a more inclusive society and inclusive education will be dependent upon this type of engagement. Even if most people support the ideas behind inclusion, it seems to be much easier to share a common and politically correct opinion with others than to implement it in practice.

The challenge ahead of us is obvious, namely to develop schools in the direction of greater acceptance for pupils' differences. This demands a professional attitude and capacity to adjust pedagogy to the groups of pupils who need special attention. It seems necessary to put pressure upon teacher education if this aim is to be achieved and the political rhetoric become transformed into reality. Up to now this challenge has principally been left to schools and teachers to deal with without any demands for documentation, evaluation or systems for follow-up. Interestingly it seems as if steering and control of special education has been paid much less attention to than that of general education. Trusting to the skills and judgements of special educational staff, work with special educational issues has been left in peace and quiet. Also in the future schools will need skilled and well-educated special educators who are capable of reflecting over their own work. But in addition to this, support from research and developmental work will be needed in order to try out recommendations generated from research. Today higher education within this field to a much higher degree than before, rests upon a scientific base and there are high ambitions for teacher students to take part in research and scientifically based knowledge.

A crucial question is whether or not special education will be able to contribute to develop the education system in a more inclusive direction. The answer is far from evident considering how this field of knowledge has developed during its relatively short existence. To express it mildly, the field has been much more occupied by developing 'special' than 'education'. This development has been far from futile but the problem is that it has given little contribution to the general education of pupils defined as difficult to teach. Consequently, if the ambition is to make schools more prepared to deal with this group of pupils as part of mainstream, research on education, learning and teaching for this group has to become intensified. This is a question of differentiation where special educational knowledge may be able to make an important contribution.

An equally important issue to discuss is to what extent the development within general education is capable to contribute to the shaping of inclusive schools. A characteristic feature of general educational research is that it to a great extent has ignored the question of pupil differences and how such differences are to be dealt with in schools. An answer to this might be that this is an issue for special educational research to consider which in turn leads us to

question the dividing line special and general education, As Tom Skrtic so pertinently described this dilemma, it brings a lot of matters to a head:

...as an institutional practice of public education, special education, I will argue, prevents education from confronting its failures, and thus ultimately precludes meaningful reform. (p. 24).

It would be unfair, however, to claim that today's situation is merely a result of deficiencies in educational and special educational research and practice. Even if the advocates of these fields represent powerful debaters, a great deal of the development is dependent upon what is going on in society and not least this is a political issue. In this connection there are good reasons to pay attention to the current political trends in our countries. As said before, the development of society has turned into an obvious individualistic direction. The individual's freedom to choose should be as great as possible which of course could be important for the individual, but the question is if this may be allowed to occur at the expense of public interests. This question is an interesting issue for wider discussions and the answers are hardly given beforehand and there are many reasons for this. One of the aims of education is that it should work as a corrective in society. Education is not only an arena for reproducing existing knowledge, attitudes and values. An equally important task is to develop and elaborate constructive and critical ideas. In that way education can contribute to best possible development for all citizens.

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