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Inclusion and classroom practices in a Swedish school: A case study of a school in Stockholm

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Abstract
The inclusion of young children with special needs with their typically developing peers has been the subject of discussion for more than three decades. There are several compelling reasons to create high-quality inclusive programs for young children with special needs in schools. Most countries supports inclusion and research has shown teachers' ability and success in modifying activities and contexts in such a way that they facilitate the development of young children with special needs. The purpose of this paper is to discuss findings of a small scale study looking at the links between inclusion and classroom practices vis-a-vis the elementary school system in Sweden. The study indicates that local administrators and the school play a pivotal role in making inclusion work. In addition to complying with government requirements, schools and administrators and teachers in early childhood environments set the tone and philosophy of a program. The paper has attempted to look at some questions about effective inclusive education, it is important to gain insight into how inclusive education works.
Keywords: childhood, children, curriculum, inclusion, teachers

1. Introduction

The inclusion of young children with special needs with their typically developing peers has been the subject of discussion for more than three decades. There are several compelling reasons to create high-quality inclusive programs for young children with special needs in schools (UNESCO, 2009). First, most countries support inclusion. Second, research has shown teachers' ability and success in modifying activities and contexts in such a way that they facilitate the development of young children with special needs. Research indicates that local administrators and the school play a pivotal role in making inclusion work. In addition to complying with government requirements, schools, administrators and teachers in other early childhood environments set the tone and philosophy of a program. The tone with which a school approach inclusion affects how teachers and families feel about inclusion as well as the capacity of the teacher to be successful in including children with disabilities (Eriksson (1998, Konza, 2008).

2. Swedish Educatin Policies

In Sweden, the National Curriculum (Lpo 94, 1998) clearly states an equivalent education for all, independent of gender, class and ethnicity. Education should be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs. It further states that, the school has a special responsibility for pupils who for whatever reason have difficulties in reaching the goals. The school should strive and ensure to help all pupils in need of special support (Lpo 94, 1998, p. 6). Based on the pupil's background, earlier experiences, language and knowledge, it should promote the pupil's further learning and acquisition of knowledge (p. 7). The head teacher has the overall responsibility for making sure that the activity of the school as a whole is focused on attaining the national goals. S/he also has the responsibility to ensure that 'pupils have access to guidance, teaching material of good quality as well as other assistance' (p. 23). Special concern is given to pupils in need of special support: 'Remedial measures are adjusted to assessments made by teachers of the pupil's development' (p. 24). Pupils' rights to special education are prescribed in Government decrees as well. If the pupil is presumed not to reach the goals, the pupil has a right to special education. Special education is preferably given in the pupil's ordinary class or group, but if there are special circumstances the support might be given in a special group. The Government decrees also prescribe the head teachers' task in ensuring that an individual education plan is made for pupils in need of special support. The plan should be made in co-operation between teacher, pupil and its parents. The plan should make clear what will be done, how it will be done and who is responsible for the work and activities. Also, evaluations should be made continuously.

Swedish commitment to young children and their families was noted throughout a report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1994). The Lpo 94, the preschool curriculum document, begins with strong statements that reflect deep societal values: democracy, solidarity, the value of each child, individual freedom and integrity, equality between the genders, and respect for all human life and the environment. The document continues to explain that theoretical and pedagogical understandings of childhood permeate policy and practice. A commitment to democratic ideals exists in the way children are inducted into the system; a commitment to solidarity exists in that the system is deeply concerned with the well-being of all youngsters, among them children with disabilities or recent immigrants. Sweden has the same

National Curriculum for all pupils between 6 and 16 years old. The National Curriculum (Lpo 94, 1998) prescribes an equivalent education for all, independent of gender, class and ethnicity. In addition, education should be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs. The school is said to have a special responsibility for pupils who for whatever reason have difficulties in reaching educational goals. The school should strive and ensure to help all pupils in need of special support (Lpo 94, 1998, p. 6). Based on the pupil's background, earlier experiences, language and knowledge, it should promote the pupil's further learning and acquisition of knowledge (p. 7).

A major goal of this paper is to investigate if the above ideal is the reality in Sweden today? In this paper I will use findings from a field study to try to answer this question. In May of 2013, I conducted field study visit in a school in the Stockholm area, to study the link between inclusion and classroom practices vis-a-vis the elementary school system in Sweden. Specifically, I wanted to see if and/or how inclusion were reflected in teachers' classroom practices, as schools tend to embody the deepest values and beliefs of the mainstream culture.

3. Literature Review

Definition of Inclusion

Research indicates that there is little consensus in practice about how 'inclusion' is defined and what the major dimensions of inclusion actually are (Schwartz, Sandall, Odom, Horn, & Beckman 2002:11). A school for everyone means that all students should have access to and receive an equivalent education.... Inclusion means to participate in the whole. Teaching should therefore occur within the framework of the ordinary class; social feelings of solidarity and time together are prioritized, and differences between children are accepted and respected. In this perspective, differences between remedial and ordinary teaching are small and demand that all teaching personnel are able to teach all children. (The Swedish National Agency for Education Skolverket, 1998, p.3) Generally, it can be assumed that integration or inclusive education depends upon what teachers do in classrooms. The way in which teachers realize inclusion within their classrooms can take different forms.

Inclusion is a term used to describe the ideology that each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, should be educated in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Globally, educational philosophies related to children with special needs have undergone a transformation over recent decades. As a result, policymakers, educators, and parents worldwide have made serious attempts to facilitate inclusive educational practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

During the 1990's the view on special education broadened and deepened. It meant that special educational research started to challenge the circumstances, processes and values taken for granted in ordinary school settings, where dilemmas arose (Emanuelsson, 1998; Persson, 2001). Research on this relational perspective is increasing in Sweden although the more individual related - the so-called categorical perspective - is still dominating. It may be said that inclusive classes have not yet been fully realized in education in Sweden (Emanuelsson 1992, Emanuelsson, Persson & Rosenqvist, 2001).

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010) mentions that the process of inclusion is the assumption that the general classroom teacher has certain knowledge and understanding about the needs of different learners, teaching techniques and curriculum strategies. Florian and Rouse (2009) state: 'The task of initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children' (p. 596). Savolainen (2009) notes that teachers play an essential role in quality education and quotes McKinsey and Company who say: 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers'. (p. 16) Studies suggest (Sanders and Horn, 1998; Bailleul et al., 2008) that the quality of the teacher contributes more to learner achievement than any other factor, including class size, class composition, or background. The need for 'high quality' teachers equipped to meet the needs of all learners becomes evident to provide not only equal opportunities for all, but also education for an inclusive society. Reynolds (2009) says that it is the knowledge, beliefs and values of the teacher that are brought to bear in creating an effective learning environment for pupils, making the teacher a critical influence in education for inclusion and the development of the inclusive school.

3.1 The Changing Conceptions of Inclusion in Schools

According to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, (2010) there has been a clear move towards inclusive practice and wide agreement on the key principles first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Since that time, these principles have been reinforced by many conventions, declarations and recommendations at international levels, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which makes explicit reference to the importance of ensuring inclusive systems of education. The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) set out the following justifications

for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together: Educational justification. Inclusive schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children. Social justification. Inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society. Economic justification. It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools 'specializing' in different groups of children.

3.2 The Attitude of Teachers

Wang (2009) emphasis that, while inclusion is beneficial for developing the competencies and skills of both students and teachers alike, implementing a program of inclusion will most likely put teachers under considerable pressure brought about by the required environmental restructuring. He further mentioned that based on several studies, reports of teachers unable to find enough time for the application of inclusion were frequent and common (Diebold & Von Eschenbach, 1991; Semmel et al., 1991). Teachers face constant dilemmas (Dyson, 2001). The dilemma includes pace, learning styles, seating arrangements, and individual attention. Catering to a range of needs in a single class was difficult for some teachers. Where adequate resource staff were available, successful integration could be jeopardized by poor coordination between resources and classroom teaching, or by over dependence on an untrained teacher aide (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 23).

3.3 Why is cultural diversity in teaching important?

There is a lot of oppression and discrimination because of ethnic origin, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or sexual identity, in the world. And "in a large institution [as in the school] there needs to be a solid base to work against discrimination" (Nieto, 2000). Addressing the issue of diversity helps to reduce prejudice and will increase the understanding, acceptance, tolerance and cooperation between the students within the classroom. In diverse democratic nation states there is the challenge to provide equal opportunities for different groups. Sadly often the method of assimilating these groups towards the powerful culture is used, which has the consequence that many students lose their first cultures, languages and identities (Berglund, 2009). This is the idea behind the teaching the exceptional and cultural different approach (Gardner, 2001). That is another reason why it is important to talk in a democratic way about the issue of cultural diversity and it effects of society. The school is one of the biggest educational institutions and should create an equal democratic foundation and surrounding for students to learn.

Further it is not just important to teach about cultural diversity but also to reconsider teaching in a cultural diverse classroom. There are many factors a teacher needs to keep in mind as that every student can prefer different learning strategies, has different values, feels comfortable in different languages which can all be a reason of different ethnic background, gender, social values etc. (Nieto, 2006).

4. Methods

According to Merriam (2009) qualitative research aims to investigate the unknown phenomena through internal nature, as for example analyzing the thoughts and feelings of people. The study was done using observation and interviews at one school in Stockholm, observed some classes and interviewed some of the teachers in whose classroom lessons I observed, as well as an assistant headmistress in the school, I interviewed some teachers during the process of observing them teach in the classroom. Also I read some government and agency documents and research reports and gathered general information on schooling system. The information gained through these sources is presented here to provide a picture of inclusive education in the school.

5. Classroom and School Procedure

This section presents the data from interviews and observations made during the study, based on the interviewed with the assistant headmistress of the school who was responsible for special education issues she mentioned that the school policy was to include all children, but noted that special classes and schools are available, too. She also cited a lack of resources as an obstacle to inclusion, but added decentralization of practices versus government mandates, the increasing emphasis on national testing, and a fairly significant immigrant population as further complications. She also noted that social and academic goals are often in conflict; and teachers and schools sometimes feel they have to emphasize academics at the expense of socialization.

Further, she pointed out that headmasters face a conflict between concentrating on general resources, which implies smaller classes and fewer teachers for all children at the expense of special resources, or concentrating on specific efforts with proportionately more remedial teachers and larger groups. Thus, the headmaster's (or mistress's) role is crucial: She or he can say, "We will cater to all children," and thus create a school where the way in which the school works for all becomes the concern of all. If s/he does not take this approach, teachers then often send "those kids" to the special educators and put aside their concerns.

I considered the role of an inclusive educator as important, requiring effort and perseverance and putting oneself in the child's position. To be successful, one has to have qualities of being open-minded, gaining others' trust for them to be willing to share information, being more prepared, doing more training, questioning and being willing to try other strategies. The role could be described as making a difference in somebody's life. As one participant explained:

Does teaching occur within the framework of the "ordinary class"?
Yes and no, one teacher mentioned that in Sweden, the government makes "recommendations" so that sometimes the placement becomes the plan (e.g., a child is put into a smaller class). The guidelines allow for more flexibility, but may increase tensions between general and special education, as no clear directions are provided.
Another teacher said that the preschool year is a good time to identify children who are struggling and to put supports in place. She contended that parents have a large say in their child's placement but felt that the resources available are also factors in what kind of schooling is provided.

Are social feelings of solidarity and time together prioritized?
Again, it depends. Socialization to the group is strong, especially when children are just starting their compulsory schooling. Another teacher said that children with disabilities are supposed to be included in the general education class ("although not always, of course"), because it is good for the group to support the individual child.

In a special class for children on the autism spectrum, one of the two teachers said their children "are included, but with adult support," and that they "belong to" the school. However, I did not see much evidence to support her statement. For example, as well as teachers' comments, indicated that children in this class did not interact with the other children on the playground. The teachers said the children feel good about their schooling but are often lonely. Again, inclusion is generally believed to be a good idea, but many challenges hinder efforts to have a school for all children. "It's a nice idea," one teacher said, "but it doesn't often happen."

Are all teachers able to teach all children?
I think all the data, in response to question one, indicate a negative response to this question. In talking about the demands placed on teachers to teach all children, she noted that Swedish teachers are overworked and not expected to keep current professionally. She also thinks that teacher preparation in special education is limited and also thinks teachers need special preparation to work with children with specific disabilities.

6.Discussion

At least the implications from the findings need to be discussed. First, educators need to carefully look at both societal policies and classroom practices to see if contradictions exist between values and practices, claims and conditions (Skrtic, 1995). Secondly, we need to be aware that the ways in which societies construct their concept of children have direct implications for children's care and education. In Sweden, it seems there is a still-evolving concept of who children with disabilities are; hence, policies and practices are in flux.

The teachers in this study had some thoughts about the evolution of special education in Sweden. One teacher was not really happy about the future of education in Sweden, saying fewer teachers are getting special education training, research is not drawn on in practice, and the media tend to present political and ideological, rather than educational perspectives. She also mentioned the increasing number of at-risk children in the school system and all the probable reasons for that (e.g., immigration, poverty, more children staying in school longer, children from single parent home, and so forth).

The school teachers were questioned about changes in Swedish education over the past ten years; all noted the impact of decentralization and scarcer funding. These teachers predict less money for education; higher expectations of teachers; more awareness of education by parents, the public, and politicians; and many school reforms.

7.Conclusion

In conclusion, societal struggles around inclusion are reflected in the schools' practices and in teachers' comments, schools want to include all children but have a hard time helping children who are in need of special support belong to the whole and participate fully. Research shows that Sweden is moving toward a more general human rights orientation that is focused on autonomy for all citizens. Despite political, social, and economic constraints, educators and parents who support inclusive education can work together to ensure that all students have access to, and receive, an equivalent education. Learning about the challenges faced and successes achieved across the globe can help us move toward an education system that allows all children to participate in the whole. In summary, teachers' attitudes, available instruction time, the knowledge and skills of teachers, teaching

methods and materials seem to be important pre-requisites for successful special needs education within mainstream settings.

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