

EVEN IN SWEDEN? EXCLUDING THE INCLUDED: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF NEW POLICIES ON EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES, AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

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The purpose of this article is to reflect on the effects of educational reforms (which are guided by a neoliberal political agenda) on educational processes, outcomes, and inclusive education in Sweden. It is focused in particular on the increasing marginalisation and exclusion of students with special educational needs, immigrant students, and socially disadvantaged segments of the population. It sheds light on the mechanism in which the changes are framed: neoliberal 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. I argue here that marginalisation and segregation of socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups has increased as a consequence of this new wave of policy measures. Resultant 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.

A number of educational reforms have been devised and implemented in Sweden in the 1990s, the consequences of which have yet to be mapped out and evaluated. The reforms revolve around the political management of schools, including a decentralisation 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*.

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 neoliberal 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. 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

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Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Educational Reforms

Education as a vehicle for advancing social justice had given way to ideals based upon personal choice and competition and 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, target fulfilment) rather than that of the social inclusion of difference and diversity. 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 human rights stressing the individualisation of rights and promotion of dominant social interests (Persson & Berhanu, 2005; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Englund, 2005; Dahlstedt, 2007). In his recent book, Bauman (2004) maintains the view that we have moved away from the social state, which was committed to inclusion, to an exclusionary state committed to criminal justice and penal or crime control following the considerations of criminalizing the poor. Bauman further elaborates that, just as the welfare state was achieving some important milestones throughout the 20th century, it was already being put at risk with depoliticization of national markets that has come about in the course of economic globalization. (Jurgen Habermas refers to this as the *crises of the welfare state*). In his works such as *Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998), *Globalisation--the Human Consequences* (1998) and *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman has consistently highlighted the decline of traditional political institutions and class politics, the rise of neoliberalism and identity politics, and the fluid and fragmentary nature of social bonds and individual identity. Describing the retreat of the social state, or giving way to the contemporary state, Bauman (2004) wrote:

The social state, that crowning of the long history of European democracy and until recently its dominant form is today in retreat. The social state based its legitimacy and rested its demands for the loyalty and obedience of its citizens on the promise to defend them and insure against redundancy, exclusion and rejection as well as against random blows of fate against being consigned to human waste because of individual inadequacies of misfortunes; in short, on the promise to insert certainty and security into lives in which chaos and contingency would otherwise rule. (pp. 89-90)

The contemporary state — which is replacing the social state — Bauman contends, cannot deliver on the social state's promise and its politicians no longer repeat the promise. Instead their policies portend a yet more precarious, risk-ridden life calling for a lot of brinkmanship while making life projects all but impossible; they call on the electors to be *more flexible* (that is, to brace themselves for yet more insecurity to come) and to seek individually their own solutions to the socially produced troubles (p. 90). These pressures contribute to both individualisation and narrow communitarianism, which endanger our capacity to think in terms of common interests and fates, as well as social fairness, solidarity, and justices. This trend has already been captured within the educational discourses of Sweden as documented in the policy papers (e.g., SOU, 2000, 2001; LPO, 1994; see also Wallin, 2002, for a comprehensive discussion).

Bauman's argument and writing have compelling accountability with regard to education about the new ethical landscape. The changing nature of modern life, in particular the spread of instrumental organisations and the fragmentary and episodic character of the times, has resonated throughout the educational structure and the politics of education. As documented in his recent book (Bauman, 2004) Bauman's current thinking can be summed up in one of his usual phrases: Do we take *responsibility for our responsibility*? Do we acknowledge and accept our responsibilities, be they personal, political, or

global? Bauman problematizes these key concepts from a moral issue which also interweaves issues of ethics, culture, and politics. One important element that he points out in his thesis that has direct relevance to this article is that *Freud's thesis that human beings had traded freedom for security has been inverted and with that freedom has come unprecedented responsibilities for the conduct of our own emotional lives and for our political participation*. This trend has been observed in the current educational discourses, as can for instance, be discerned in Sweden's policy documents. The documents are replete with *terms* such as freedom, individual fate, and rights. As Bauman (1994:27) argues, freedom is modeled on freedom to choose how one satisfies individual desires and constructs one's identity via the medium of the consumer market, the consequence of which, Bauman contends, is that freedom and individual fate have increasingly become *privatized*. Yet an increasingly privatized life feeds disinterest, whether one can afford to partake in consumer freedom or not. And politics freed from constraints deepens the extent of privatisation, thus breeding *moral indifference*. One can easily detect this indifference in the current movement of politically formed arenas (e.g., schools, hospitals, social security)

The Process of Exclusion and Marginalisation: Challenges and Responses to Inclusive Education

Education is a basic right to all citizens. School communities must be inclusive of all children regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, creed, gender, or ethnicity. Schools should also recognise 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 and also 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.

Research has 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 disability. There is a strong argument in research literature and policy documents that pupils with special needs should be taught in mainstream settings alongside children of their own age, so far as possible. (see Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006, for some of the research literature on this topic). However, the situation in Sweden leaves much to be desired. It is particularly worrisome that more and more pupils with special needs, socially disadvantaged students, and pupils with immigrant backgrounds are increasingly marginalised from mainstream settings (e.g., Berhanu, 2008; Gustafsson, 2006).

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 favourable 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).

One other study (Berhanu, 2006) linked to the above research but focused on organizational and system levels has identified eight favourable factors at organization and system levels that facilitated full integration of pupils with special needs in school life: (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 non-inclusive settings (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Peetsma, Vergeer, & Karsten, 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 findings (Baker et al., 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

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 18 years ago.

Many of the social and educational changes made in the early 1990s 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 1980s. 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; Dahlstedt, 2007). 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 cited by OECD (2005, p.17) 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 cited in OECD 2005]

The number of pupils placed in educational programs for learning disabled students has increased. 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 post decentralization 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 is 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 (Berhanu, 2009).

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.

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. 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. Moreover, an overrepresentation of minority pupils in special educational placements (Berhanu, 2008) and significant gender differences in specific disability categories (Skolverket, 2005c), as well as in general learning outcomes and methods of testing and assessment, are areas of grave concern requiring further research.

Ethnic Minority and Socially Disadvantaged Students

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. That 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 (OECD, 2005).

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 siffror, 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).

I presume, on the basis of a large number of indicators, that over the next decade Swedish society will become increasingly multiethnic and multilingual, and the number of disadvantaged children will substantially increase. An estimated 20% of the Swedish population has an immigrant background. It is expected that the demographic landscape in the year 2020 is that 30% of all working age individuals in Sweden will have had their roots outside of Sweden (Leijon & Omanovic, 2001; Statistics Sweden, 2004). Many students are at greater risk of needing special education services when they are poor or of a minority race or language. The need for addressing and reviewing scientific and methodological problems explaining overrepresentation and educational outcome differences related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status becomes imperative. (The rule of thumb is that a group is considered overrepresented if their enrolment in special education is equal to or greater than 10% of their proportion in general education CEEP, 2004).

Oswald, Coutinho, and Best (2000) proposed two general hypotheses on the phenomenon of disproportionality, the first one being tied to real differences in socioeconomic outcomes between social groups, that is, that some groups (or minority students) are deeply disadvantaged (in social and economic experiences), marginalized, susceptible to diseases, and having disabilities; and the second hypothesis is that *a significant portion of the over-representation problem may be a function of inappropriate interpretation of ethnic and cultural differences as disabilities* (p. 2). As we see later in

the paper, there is sound evidence to support the second hypothesis with regard to disproportionality in Sweden (see also Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008, for a similar observation in England).

While there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that overrepresentation of minority pupils or pupils with immigrant background or socially disadvantaged groups of students in special educational placements is nationwide, the phenomenon can be identified in large cities where there are concentrations of immigrants. The over-representation is not a new phenomenon. What is new is that new forms of exclusionary measures are taking place while the force of rhetoric toward inclusive measures is gaining substantial momentum in the pedagogical discourse. This Swedish experience is exactly similar to the practices in England, as captured in the words of 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). Although extensive studies have yet to be carried out, the already existing but sporadic studies (see, e.g., Bloom, 1999; Källstigen, Ohlin, & Setkic, 2002; Källstigen, Riviera, & Özmer, 1997; Skolverket, 2005a, 2005b; SOU, 2003; Skolverket, 2000; Tideman, 2000) indicate that immigrant students are over-represented in special educational settings out of all proportion to their number. However, extensive and longitudinal studies have yet to be carried out in this specific problem area (see Rosenqvist, 2007) and there is need for a coherent cumulative body of disproportionality research. That observation is documented in big cities with large immigrant enclaves. This development in school has a definite bearing on inclusive practices as it affects involvement of all pupils in the same daily learning events.

Evaluation and Diagnostics Procedures

Surprisingly, the pattern observed elsewhere with regard to evaluation and diagnostic procedures bias is becoming increasingly visible in the Swedish context. Although the study I refer to here is based on one specific city (Bel Habib, 2001), I fear that there is such a tendency even in other parts of Sweden. The very latest study (Rosenqvist, 2007) has, as its primary finding, documented this deficiency in evaluation and diagnostic procedures (see also Dagens Nyheter, 2007). 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, 2005a, 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).

According to Bel Habib (2001), who used quantitative methods to map out the magnitude of the problem of over-representation, the majority of the Swedish students (native/white Swedes) in special schools have clear, visible, medically proven or *concretized* functional handicaps, whereas minority students who are assigned to these special schools, as the researcher distinguished from diagnosis and referral files, were categorised 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.

As is the case elsewhere (see, e.g., Losen & Orfield, 2002; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Harry & Klinger, 2006), the special educational placement pattern for ethnic minority pupils is that these students are *fairly* represented (or in other words their representation is comparable to their number in the general society) in *low incidence disabilities* (e.g., visual, hearing, multiple, and physical disabilities) and they are overrepresented in *high incidence disabilities* (e.g., emotional/behavioural disorder and learning disabilities). That means the observed overrepresentation is in *subjective cognitive disability* categories rather than in hard/visible disability categories (see Losen & Orfield, 2002). *Not surprisingly, in light of current experience in the United States, children from different social and ethnic groups found themselves disproportionately placed in these categories* (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008, p. 36/37). Dyson & Gallannaugh (2008) used the term nonnormative categories instead of *subjective cognitive disability* though. Certainly, there is some evidence from Sweden to support this instance.

This observation testifies to the fact, as Foucault (1979, 1984) consistently argued elsewhere in his extensive writings, that institutions, in this case the schools, function to maintain and even advance the

practice of normality and deviance through instruments of power and knowledge relations that not only exclude a segment of the student population but also serve as instruments to construct identities and labels such as students with special educational needs (also Allan, 1995).

The analysis indicates how the structure of schools as organisations creates special educational needs rather than differences or diversity between individual pupils. The lack of holistic, contextual, and ecological perspectives is visible because the measures used to send these children to special schools emerge from being entirely concerned only with pupils' cognitive, emotional, and pathological problems. To rectify this misguided practice, we need to, as Artiles (2003) correctly argued, *transcend the traditional individualistic perspective and infuse a social justice dimension so that the improvement of educational experiences and life opportunities for historically marginalized students is of central importance* (pp. 194-95).

Both the statistical and qualitative analysis, compiled in Losen & Orfield (2002, p. xviii) suggest some similar observations in the U.S.A. as in Sweden, although the statistical figures and the magnitude of the problem between these two countries vary considerably. These American studies suggest that racial, ethnic, and gender differences in special educational placements are due to many complex interacting factors, including unconscious racial bias on the part of school authorities, large resource inequalities that run along lines of race and class, unjustifiable reliance on IQ and other evaluation tools, educators' inappropriate responses to the pressures of high-stakes testing, and power differentials between minority parents and school officials.

The problem surrounding the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in special educational arrangements in Sweden is complex, and some of the evidence presented here and in Berhanu's article (2008) also point to problems surrounding the home environment, including poverty; sociocultural related problems, family factors, and language problems; the lack of parental participation in decision making and the huge power distance between parents and school authority; institutional intransigence and prejudices; and large resource inequalities that run along lines of *race* and class. Similarly, Dyson & Gallannaugh (2008) argued, based on a very recent research on proportionality in England, that *although the identification of children as having special educational needs may result most immediately from the construction of difference at the school and teacher levels, that construction is itself a response to educational and social inequalities. It follows that a proper understanding of disproportionality, capable of generating effective means of combating it, requires an analysis not only of processes of construction but also of the underlying processes and structures through which social and educational inequality are produced* (p. 43).

Future studies in Sweden should systematically evaluate the following area of problem or research questions (see Losen & Orfield, 2002):

- What is the chain of events that sets certain students, from various backgrounds, in certain school districts, on the road to special education placement or special schools?
- Is there one or many patterns?
- By what criteria do those responsible for special education placements evaluate students for these programs? (see Dagens Nyheter, 2007; Rosenqvist, 2007)
- How is this cycle initiated and how can it be stopped?
- What are the students actually like?
- What are the criteria for referral and special educational placements?
- What is the parental role or role of culture in this process, and how do parents perceive their responsibility?
- To what extent do social factors override (special) educational efforts intended to rectify school failures?

There are some signs that at least the school authorities are aware of the problem. The public media and several researchers have dealt with the phenomenon of disproportionality, and that has led to increased awareness of the problem. Data from a recent study do not *support* the existence of disproportionality at a national level, although it does appear to be concentrated in large cities. The distribution of disproportionality suggests the dubious nature of the diagnostic procedure and the assessment culture (Rosenqvist, 2007).

The Road Forward

The *fragmentation* of educational policymaking that we have witnessed 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. As stated earlier, 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).

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).

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 neoliberal 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.

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 some hope, therefore, 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, favourable 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:

- a strong, popular and successful preschool combining care, nurture and education
- a well-designed, broad and attractive comprehensive curriculum
- an encouraging and non-threatening learning culture for all
- opportunities for bridges and second chance provision at all levels

- absence of dead ends
- equivalence of qualifications, and
- 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.

The justification for inclusive education is based in part on the ideals of social justice and the fact 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 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 class work. 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)

Notes

[1] Some parts of this article are condensed from the author's previous work: An article entitled *Ethnic Minority Pupils in Swedish Schools: Some Trends in Over-Representation of Minority Pupils in Special Educational Programmes*, in *The International Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2008, and a paper entitled *A Comparative Analysis of Equity in Inclusive Education*, presented at a research forum at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences (CASBS), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, U.S.A., February 1-5, 2009.

[2] 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 (using current ppps). 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 7 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.

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