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Contextualizing inclusive education in educational policy: the case of Sweden

Gunnlaugur Magnússon a,b, Kerstin Göransson c and Gunilla Lindqvist a

aSchool of Education, culture and communication, Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna, Sweden; bDepartment of education, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; cDepartment of educational studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

ABSTRACT
In this article, we regard inclusive education as a policy phenomenon that contains a range of ideas about the purpose of education, the content of education and the organization of education. As a political ideal expressed in policy, inclusive education competes with other political ideals regarding education, for instance economic discourses that prioritize effectiveness and attainment as educational goals. Thus, inclusive education has to be realized in contexts where available options for action are restricted by several and often contradictory educational policies on different levels of the education system. We argue that while research and debate about inclusive education are important, both are insufficient without analyses of the context of national educational policy. Any interpretation of inclusive education is necessarily situated in a general education policy, and measures of what â€œinclusive schoolsâ€”are dependent upon for instance, political interpretation(s) of inclusive education, resource allocation and political discourse on both local and national educational level. Here, we will provide support for this argument through presentation of both research on inclusive education, an alignment of prior analyses of Swedish national education policies and our own analyses of government statements.

Introduction
With the actions of UNESCO, the idea of inclusive education has become a global policy vision for education (UNESCO, 1994, 2000, 2015; cf. Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997). Although the nominal idea of inclusive education is commonly accepted, it is a concept that encompasses many different definitions and interpretations (e.g. Amor et al., 2018; Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006; Kiuppis, 2013; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). As Vislie points out with reference to Shaw, 'tensions arise from different understandings of the inclusion process and from different value systems' (Vislie, 2003, p. 22). Thus, different actors are likely to be supporting different arrangements of inclusive education. Our wish is to put the focus on this tension, i.e. the relationship between inclusive education and the general context of education policy (e.g. Evans & Lunt, 2002; Slee, 2001). We argue that inclusive education develops in relation to several other education policies on different levels of the education system and that this limits available options for actions for schools, school leaders, teachers etc. (cf. Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Clark, Dyson, & Millward, 1998). Thus, national and international education policies make certain processes more likely to occur than others (cf. Lundgren, 1999), affecting the interpretation and enactment of inclusive education.

Sweden is an interesting case that demonstrates the complexity of enacting inclusive education. The Swedish education system has been characterized as undergoing education paradigm shifts in the past few decades (e.g. Englund, 1998; Lundahl, 2005; Magnússon, 2015). First, the Swedish education system moved from having one of the most centralized systems in the world to becoming remarkably decentralized (Lundahl, 2005, 2010) and from being in the top tier regarding equity in the education system to falling in at the on-average level among the OECD countries (OECD, 2018). Second, the understanding of education has moved from a collectivistic view to an individualistic view, defining education as a commodity to be purchased in a market rather than a public good (Englund, 1998; Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008). The Swedish school system has long been renowned and seen as exemplary for its ambition to be a ‘school for all’, and for its inclusive tendencies (OECD 2011). However, marketization has contributed to escalating social segregation within the school system (Bunar, 2010; The Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2012; Trumberg, 2011; Magnússon, 2015; OECD, 2018). These concurrent developments make Sweden a good case to study how different political prioritizations affect inclusive education as an ambition for the education system.

The aim of this paper is an argumentative one, pursuing to place focus on the relationship between
inclusive education and the general context of education policy and political ambitions. The procedure of the article’s argument follows the following steps. First, we will define our theoretical points of departure, analytical approach and methodological considerations. We provide a short description of the Swedish educational context. Following this some important variations of the definitions of inclusive education are illustrated. We then present and align analyses by Lundahl (2005) and Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) to demonstrate political fluctuations in education politics and special education policies respectively. Finally, after adding our own analyses of government statements from the past 23 years to illustrate political fluctuations in education policies, we summarize our argument and draw some conclusions as regards implications of this article for future research and policy.

Theoretical points of departure and methodological considerations

Education systems are organized through a myriad of policy texts. In Sweden, a complex web of national legislation, regulations, curricula, local documents and regulations, as well as international agreements and legislations, structures the education system from the organizational level to day-to-day practice. These policy texts express the political intentions and ideas about education, its aims, implementation and priorities (Apple, 2004). In this article, we adapt a broad view, viewing policies as statements about practice, ‘intended to bring about idealised solutions to diagnosed problems’ (Ball, 1990, p. 26). As such, they not only prescribe practice, but also define the relationships between actors on different levels including how pupils are to become citizens of and for society, as well as what type of citizens are to be formed (Popkewitz, 2008).

The political ideas behind policies are influenced by economic, political and ideological issues, which differ between different societies and over time (Apple, 2004). Policies can thus be defined as products of compromises between different actors on several societal levels (Ball, 1993) often containing several contradicting goals that schools must find ways to enact (Ball et al., 2012). Policy is thus ‘in the state of becoming, continually contested and interpreted by those initiating it, by those supposed to implement it and by external actors’ (Magnússon, 2015, p. 74). In other words, practitioners and individual schools face series of dilemmas and contradictions in practice, often difficult to solve (Clark et al., 1998). This also means that policy can be seen as both legislative and regulatory texts (such as curricula or laws), as local governing plans or specifications of bureaucratic procedures, as speeches, reports, contracts, statistical descriptions and statements (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

The view on policy, illustrated above, has consequences for our analytical procedures. The analyses in this article are inspired by Bacchi’s method ‘What is the Problem Represented to be?’ or ‘WPR’ (Bacchi, 1999; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The method is useful when analyzing the problematization that is more or less explicitly expressed in policies. The manner in which an issue is formulated and presented as a problem will affect the understanding of the problem, as well as the potential solutions that can (or cannot) be used to amend it (Bacchi, 1999). Bacchi suggests a battery of questions to identify and evaluate problems and solutions in policies and to examine critically both the underlying assumptions and political ideals behind them. The questions we utilize in our analysis are adapted from Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) and regard (1) what problems appear in the documents, (2) how they are prioritized, as well as (3) the solutions suggested to amend the problems.

We attend to our aim with a two-step approach. First of all, we build upon a foundation of prior policy analyses, namely Lundahl’s (2005) analysis of education policy in Sweden, and Isaksson and Lindqvist’s (2015) analysis of special education policy. Lundahl’s analysis provides an overview of political prioritizations in Swedish education politics with a chronological framework. Isaksson and Lindqvist utilize Lundahl’s chronological framework for their analysis of politics regarding special education and add an additional time period to it. By presenting and aligning these two previous analyses we wish to illustrate how special education is contingent upon other political discourses regarding education. We then continue with the second part of our approach, i.e. our own analysis of government statements, in order to illustrate this relationship of political ideals for education further. Government statements are speeches to parliament in which prime ministers outline government primary intentions and focus for the upcoming year. While government statements do not govern the education system or directly influence educational practice, they explicitly illustrate political ambitions, ideals and goals the governments intend to emphasize, and specify areas for reforms. The government statements are speeches to parliament in which prime ministers outline government primary intentions and focus for the upcoming year. While government statements do not govern the education system or directly influence educational practice, they explicitly illustrate political ambitions, ideals and goals the governments intend to emphasize, and specify areas for reforms. The government statements are speeches to parliament in which prime ministers outline government primary intentions and focus for the upcoming year. While government statements do not govern the education system or directly influence educational practice, they explicitly illustrate political ambitions, ideals and goals the governments intend to emphasize, and specify areas for reforms.
We limited the choice of government statements to a time-frame of 23 years, the first from the year 1994 and the last one from 2017. The time-frame chosen follows the concurrent political shifts. As regards the lower bounds of the time-frame, the year 1994 was important for several reasons. First of all, it was the starting point of then newly elected government following elections resulting in a political shift to a social democratic government from a conservative government (1990–1994). The previous government had implemented several far reaching reforms, and among other things new curricula were implemented starting from the year 1994. This is also the year that the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was signed and published, placing inclusive education on the international political stage as an educational ideal. The upper bound of the time-frame as regards the chosen government statements is 2017. An election was held in Sweden in September 2018, however, the election resulted in a political predicament in the parliament that had, at the time of writing, not resulted in a government, and hence, no government statement. The government statements were analyzed using Bacchi and Goodwin’s framework described above.

By aligning our own analyses with prior analyses of education policies, we can illustrate some of the assumptions underlying the representation of education as a political problem and discuss the theoretical consequences for inclusive education. However, before turning to these analyses, we will describe both the current context of Swedish education, research as regards inclusive education and inclusive education as a policy phenomenon.

The current context of Swedish education

In this section, we will present some characteristic features of inclusive education in Sweden. First, the conceptualization of pupils that fall under the scope of special education is wider in Sweden than in many other countries. Pupils that risk not reaching the knowledge goals of the curriculum are defined with the term ‘pupils in need of special support’. The concept has a wide scope, not limited to specific medical or psychological diagnoses but rather the context within which problems arise. Swedish policy documents state that students in need of special support and students with disabilities should receive their education within the regular education system and within regular classes (SFS 2010:800). Further, The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800; Chapter 3; §11) states that special educational support may only be provided outside the student’s regular classroom, if there are special reasons for such measures, i.e. separate organizational solutions in segregated settings are to be exceptions. However, the legislation also places the legal responsibility of assessment and implementation of these requirements with the head teachers, which leaves a large space for interpretations (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011).

The majority of Swedish students in need of special support receive support within the regular classroom. While the number of students who receive support in special, segregated organizational forms fluctuates locally (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011; Magnússon, 2015), the proportions seem relatively stable from year to year (Tah, 2018). Additionally, the proportion of segregated special education groups increases as the students grow older (The Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2016). Furthermore, the number of independent schools (i.e. schools owned and run by private actors but publically funded) that specialize in student groups with special educational needs, has increased during the last decade (SNAE, 2014; Göransson, Magnússon, & Nilholm, 2012; Magnússon, 2015; Tah, 2018).

A survey to the total population of Swedish students in grades 6 and 9 (PHAS, 2012) showed that a greater share of students with disabilities stated that they seldom or never had fun with friends or classmates and that they were afraid of other students and got bullied. In addition, fewer students with disabilities stated that they had friends with whom they could interact. Social exclusion and bullying in Swedish regular compulsory schools also seems to be two of the main reasons why parents and students choose independent schools that specialize in student groups with special educational needs according to case studies performed by the Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE, 2014). Additionally, the proportion of pupils in need of support varied considerably depending on the profile of the independent schools (Magnússon, Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Magnússon, 2015) and there are reports that independent schools provide special educational resources to a much lower degree than schools run by the municipalities (Magnússon, 2015; Magnússon, Göransson, & Nilholm, 2017; Ramberg, 2015). The results indicated that the choice of schools is limited for pupils in need of special support compared to other pupil groups (see also, Göransson et al., 2012). Whether or not that means that explicit organizational exclusion of pupils in need of special educational support is more frequent today than previously, is unclear however (Tah, 2018). Hence, while the Swedish education system is often recognized as particularly inclusive, the numbers above indicate that this varies greatly within the system. This leads us to the question what is meant by
the terms inclusive education, and what its relationship is to special education.

**Inclusive education as an educational ideal in theory and in policy**

Inclusive education is constituted both as international policy with national implications, as well as being a contested and diverse field of both theoretical and empirical/practical research. Therefore, an examination of inclusive education as an educational ideal expressed in policy, such as this paper, must include a short review of how the concept appears in research. Inclusive education is seen here as an education ideal, constituted of particular visions of education. As such, it embodies distinct normative beliefs about the purpose, as well as the content and organization of education (cf. Schiro, 2013). However, these beliefs vary greatly both in theory and practice and inclusive education embodies ‘a range of assumptions about the meaning and purpose of schools’, as well as a range of philosophical conceptualizations (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p. 131). The interpretation and implementation of what inclusive education means is thus a matter of contextualization in a more general policy context and even cultural traditions.

**Research on inclusive education**

Some of the more problematic issues within the field of inclusive education regards the question of who is in focus for the concept (Florian, 2008; Hansen, 2012; Nilholm, 2006) and its relationship to special education. Kiuppis (2013) argues that when the term inclusive education was coined in the Salamanca Statement in 1994, it had a distinctly outspoken focus on special needs and disabilities, and was therefore firmly rooted in special education. However, since its launch in 1994, the concept has evolved a more encompassing definition, in which the focus regards creating inclusive education for all children, weakening the focus on disability and making it more akin to the project ‘education for all’ (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Hope & Hall, 2018; Kiuppis, 2013; Miles & Singal, 2010). In a recent review of research literature regarding inclusive education, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) noted four types of definitions of inclusive education within the research literature:

- Focusing on the placement of children with special needs in regular classrooms;
- Focusing on meeting social academic needs of pupils with special needs;
- Focusing on meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils;
- and finally, focusing on creating communities.

These definitions of inclusive education were often not explicit in the reviewed research (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). A later article by these researchers concluded that there was a clear gap as regards the view of the concept between empirical and theoretical articles, as well as a distinct overrepresentation of particular theoretical approaches (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). This indicates that the field of research on inclusive education is far from being unanimous regarding the pupil groups that are subject to inclusion, what the relationship of inclusive education is to special education, or what inclusive education should look like in practice (cf. Magnússon, 2015, p. 36–38). There is, in other words, no particular consensus within research, aside that inclusive education should reduce unwarranted and arbitrary exclusion of pupils. An additional point to the conceptual diversity, that has been addressed is the empirical shortcomings of the research literature (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017), a conclusion recently confirmed in a systematic review of both English and Spanish research literature (Amor et al., 2018).

The idea that inclusive education embodies ideas about a socially just and equitable society can be seen in the writings of frequently cited researchers within the field (e.g. Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Barton, 1997; Evans & Lunt, 2002; Ferguson, 2008; Naraian, 2011; Vislie, 2003; Slee, 2001, 2008, 2011). Several researchers argue that inclusive education should not be reduced to the organizational placement of the pupil (e.g. Ainscow, Fallef & Tweedle, 2000; Articles et al., 2006; Emanuelsson, 2001; Ferguson, 2008; Haug, 1998; Slee, 2008; Thomazet, 2009; Vislie, 2003). It has even been argued that the organizational practice of ‘mainstreaming’ (the placement of pupils with special needs in ‘regular classrooms’) risks fostering a reproduction of exclusionary traditional special education practices and policies in regular education if not accompanied by other measures (Emanuelsson, 2001; Vislie, 2003). Further, some researchers argue that identifying educational difficulties in terms of labelling pupils would be the first step towards exclusionary practices, and thus not in accordance with the ideals of inclusive education (e.g. Haug, 1998; Vislie, 2003). As long as educational difficulties are viewed as results of individual shortcomings, marginalization and exclusion of pupils will prevail within the education system (e.g. Ainscow, 1998; Clark et al., 1998; Emanuelsson, 2001; Skrtic, 1991). However, there are researchers who argue that inclusive education should keep its focus on particular pupil groups, i.e. those that have specific diagnosis or disabilities, in order to maintain focus on inclusive education as a project aiming for participation of these particular pupil groups. This is particularly visible in the international context (e.g. Kiuppis, 2013; Miles & Singal, 2010).
While some researchers have argued that inclusive education is contradictory to education policies, such as marketization and standards agendas (e.g. Slee, 2011; Tisdall and Riddell, 2006), the consequences may not be that schools have to choose one type of policy over the other. Rather, it is not unusual for schools having to balance their work within a policy context that demands different and sometimes contradicting objectives (e.g. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; Engsig and, Johnstone, 2015; Dyson and Gallanaugh, 2008; Magnusson, 2015). There are several explanations for this. For instance, practitioners in schools have to balance contradicting policies as a part of their everyday work (Ball et al., 2012; Clark et al., 1998). Another explanation is that the policies may be influenced by several ideals simultaneously and that there are no clear distinctions between the political agendas embedded in them (Ball, 1993).

**Inclusive education as international policy**

According to The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), The Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and The Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015), the purpose of inclusive education has implications outside of the educational context. In these documents, inclusive education is linked to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), where the purpose of education is stated to be: ‘the full development of the human personality’ and to ‘promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups’ (article 26). Education is regarded as a public good and inclusive education is seen as an expression of a vision ‘inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development’ (article 5, UNESCO, 2015). Inclusive education is seen as a ‘crucial step’ to develop an inclusive society’ (article 3, UNESCO, 1994). Values like social justice, equity, shared responsibility and diversity are defined as central, and schools with an inclusive orientation are claimed to be

‘the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.’ (UNESCO, 1994, article, p. 2).

According to these UNESCO documents, i.e. The Salamanca Statement (1994), The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and The Incheon Declaration (2015), inclusive education aims at developing the whole personality. In the Dakar framework this is formulated in article 3 in terms of

‘...an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be. It is an education geared to tapping each individual’s talents and potential, and developing learners’ personalities, so that they can improve their lives’ (UNESCO, 2000).

The Incheon statement connects inclusive education to education for all and ‘quality education’ and argues that it ‘develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions and respond to local and global challenges’ (UNESCO, 2015, article, p. 9). Further, pupils are to be able to influence their school situation, and curricula and teaching are to be adapted to their needs and prerequisites. Additionally, parents are defined as ‘privileged partners’ and are as such to be given the opportunity to participate and influence their children’s education, as well as be ‘accorded the choice of education for their children’ (UNESCO, 1994, article 60). The goals above are likely to be of interest for all pupil groups.

To summarize, in an international policy perspective, inclusive education can be seen as a set of political ideals – even decrees – for educational practice, ranging from specific definitions and foci on pupils with special needs or disabilities, to broader ideals of ‘creating communities’ for all pupils. As discussed above, a similar shift and lack of clarity has been identified in the research literature (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Kiuppis, 2013; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). However, the common nominator as regards policy is that inclusive education is viewed as means to create a more just society, as well as to increase cost-effectiveness and attainment and to create competent, tolerant and self-sufficient citizens for the future society. Hence, there are elements of both collectivist and individualist notions in these documents (Engsig & Johnstone, 2015; Popkewitz, 2008). The meaning of inclusive education in practice is thus subject to prioritization among politicians and governmental actors, policy writers, researchers, practitioners, parents/guardians and the pupils themselves. The interpretation in turn sets constraints on the construction of inclusion within the organizational framework of education and possibilities of practice (Hunt, 2011; Sailor, 2017). As different countries have different prerequisites to implement such ideals it becomes important to study whether such ideals are expressed in national education policies and, if so, how?

**Political shifts in Swedish national education policy**

Lundahl (2005) makes a distinction between three time-periods of education policy as regards governance and control. The first period lasted between the late 1970s–1990s, and is termed ‘Steps toward increased local autonomy’, the second between 1991 and 1998 is termed ‘Shift in a neoliberal direction’ and finally a more speculatively termed period ‘Bringing the state back?’ between late 1990s and
early 2000s. The first period describes the first steps from a shift from a very centralized education system marked by social-democratic ideology towards a more deregulated and decentralized system. This was the foundation for further privatization of the education system in the 1990s where neoliberal ideas, including economic terminology and market rationality (individual choice, competition and efficiency) gained ground and became central to Swedish education politics (see also, Englund, 1998; Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008). While this particular shift is often described as a paradigm shift in Swedish education politics (e.g. Englund, 1998), Wedin (2018) illustrates that political formulations of problems (in his case through the concept of equality) may have roots further back in time than sometimes acknowledged. This can be compared to Hwang’s (2002) illustration of how the concept ‘equity’ was redefined through political reformulations of educational ambitions regarding school-choice in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, although organizational consequences can be great, conceptual shifts in education politics may be the results of more gradual historical developments and political inheritance of problems rather than paradigmatic revolutions.

Finally, the third and last period regards that education policy was influenced by economic crises and austerity, as well as growing difference in educational attainment related to social categories (gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic background). This led the government to intervene more actively both via education policy and for instance with financial resources, a form of centralization of power and influence. A right-wing coalition took over government in 2006 and implemented a series of education reforms entailing increased state engagement and control of education. These reforms included a new school legislation and curricula, a reformed teacher education and a restoration of a state governed school inspection. While this could be viewed as a form of centralization, turning over prior policies and ideals of a decentralized and deregulated system, researchers have argued that processes of centralization and decentralization are rarely opposites; rather they often occur concurrently (Hudson, 2007; Nordin, 2014).

**Inclusive education policy**

If these trends outlined above constitute overarching tendencies in education politics in Sweden, the question becomes how inclusive education as a policy is affected by them and other fluctuations of education politics. First of all, it seems that despite its international reputation as an inclusive education system, Swedish education policies are far from clear in their expressions of inclusive goals for education (Göransson et al., 2011) and emphasis has altered in varying degrees over time (Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015). Göransson et al. (2011) analyzed several education policy texts, including legislation, ordinances, reports, curricula and government proposals. This analysis showed that the term inclusive education was not found in any important documents, and that it was not clearly stated as a goal for education. While support for conceptions of inclusive ideals of education is found in more general terms in Swedish policy (see also Lundahl, Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013), there are openings for organizational and practical interpretation on both municipal and school level. For example, as mentioned above, while segregated education of pupils in need of special support are to be avoided according to law, such definitions are in practice left to the head teacher’s discretion.

Recently, an analysis of how special education is formulated in Swedish policy documents was published (Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015). It utilizes the time-periods from Lundahl’s (2005) analysis, referred to in the prior section, and adds a fourth period covering mid-2000s-2014. According to this analysis, a relational model of disability emerges as regards special education in the late 1970s to the 1990s. The traditional view of the pupils as the carriers of flaws or deficiencies was questioned and school difficulties were seen as arising in the interplay between the individual and the social environment. The ambitions were to reduce segregated solutions and to separate special educational organizational solutions and increase mainstreaming and integration.

In the second time period, 1990–1998, new curricula and grading systems placed emphasis on knowledge goals and results as prerequisites for special support. Pupils failing to reach the knowledge goals of the curricula were thus defined as in need of special support, and special education was seen as a proper intervention. Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) argue that this is an example of a dislocation in education policy, with an increased individualistic focus leading to a new definition of school difficulties. Between the 1990s and early 2000s special education became integrated in pupil health services and linked to management. At the same time, demands for medical- and health-related expert knowledge arose as results of increased focus on neuro-psychiatric disorders and symptoms.

Finally, the period between the mid-2000s and 2014 was marked by intense and frequent education reforms covering all stages of the Swedish education system. These reforms had an outspoken focus on knowledge acquisition and attainment with emphasis on comparative international assessments (Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015). The idea of inclusive education was openly criticized and individual deficiencies were increasingly seen as the explanation for school problems and a revival of
special education as a tool to accommodate specific pupils with specific support for their failure to achieve the knowledge goals of education.

As can be seen in Table 1, an alignment of Isaksson’s and Lindqvist’s (2015) analysis with Lundahl’s (2005) analysis allows us to illustrate the influence of shifts in the political discourse of education on policy regarding the provision of special support and thus the importance of special education. As inclusive education has its roots firmly in special education and the critique towards it, it can be argued that the above demonstrated fluctuations in policy can indicate how emphasis and ambitions of ideals of inclusive education fluctuate.

**Government statements**

In the following sections, we present the results from our analysis of government statements from over two decades (1994–2017), looking for problematizations and ambitions that regard education (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). As discussed above, Social-democratic governments (two different prime ministers) were in place between 1994 and 2006 (12 statements), a right-wing coalition of four conservative and liberal parties governed between 2006 and 2014 (eight statements), and a coalition government of the Social-democratic Party and the liberal environmental Green Party, supported by the Left Party, governed from the autumn of 2014 until 2108 (four statements). As mentioned above, the election in the autumn of 2018 had not rendered a government at the time of writing (January, 2019), and thus no government statement had yet been made.

Table 2 illustrates the discursive shifts following the political shifts in Sweden. In the first time frame here, 1994–2006 education was discussed as a tool for the future, and further financial contributions were announced to municipal welfare organs, where education was one part of the triad Education – Health – Welfare. After the millennium shift, more specific numbers were mentioned when describing the prioritizing of the welfare sector, and education was in particular focus, as Sweden was to continue to be a ‘leading knowledge-nation’. Here, the essential message to schools was more economic resources, more teachers and more education for currently working teachers, intending to reduce inequalities and injustice within the system. The social democratic governments of the period 1994–2006 conceptualized their politics with the concepts equity and quality, equity regarding individuals’ possibilities to obtain good results, and quality defined as opposed to ‘variety among schools’ which was seen as leading to inequality and segregation. Special education received little room, but ambitions for more teachers with knowledge within special education were mentioned.

In the second time frame, 2006–2013, education was described as being in crisis, if not collapse. Following disheartening reports from international comparisons such as PISA and TIMMS, the falling results were primarily explained as resulting from a lack of discipline and insufficiently calm study environments. Knowledge became a key word, as it was what Sweden was seen to have been failing at in international comparisons. Reforms were introduced at all levels of the education system, including new legislation, new (or revised) curricula, new teacher education, revived special teacher education, new grading scales, additional standardized national

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**Table 1. Alignment of policy analyses.**

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<tr>
<td>1970–1990</td>
<td>Steps toward increased local autonomy</td>
<td>Special education and the relational model of disability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A period of decentralization and deregulation</td>
<td>Emergence of a relational model of disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transfer of fiscal and employee responsibility from the state to municipalities.</td>
<td>Open questioning of segregated organization of special education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marketization and privatization of education</td>
<td>Special education as an intervention for pupils failing to achieve knowledge goals (focus on individual attainment)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Output of schools increasingly emphasized</td>
<td>Introduction of a new profession for special education (SENCOs)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increasing social inequality</td>
<td>Relational perspective downplayed and individualist perspective gains strength</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National testing introduced</td>
<td>Integration of special education in pupil health activities and school management</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>A widening of the definition of pupil in need of support – relational perspective favoured</td>
<td>A widening of the definition of pupil in need of support – relational perspective favoured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased active intervention from government via regulation and fiscal resources</td>
<td>Particular diagnoses mentioned – an integration of medical perspective in the overall relational perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increased segregation and growing differences in attainment</td>
<td>Special support seen as a complement to regular pedagogic activities, not to be provided only by ‘experts’</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004–2014</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Education policy and special education in the melting pot</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intense reforming with a return of traditional special education (tool to accommodate specific pupils with individual deficiencies)</td>
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<td>Inclusive education openly questioned</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One-to-one teacher/pupil ratio, segregated measures and special teachers as experts viewed as solutions to problems</td>
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tests, an introduction of new government agency for school inspections (The School Inspectorate), and finally more detail-oriented governing of the education system. However, private initiatives such as independent schools were viewed as essential, and it was explicitly stated that ‘the problem’ does not concern ownership, but rather quality, of schools. The term quality was seen as measureable via the knowledge acquisition (i.e. attainment) of pupils, rather than the content of education. While equity was a key concept for both the preceding and subsequent governments, the right-wing coalition of 2006–2013 maintained that education that focused on ‘knowledge’ would lead to equality and participation, as it would prepare pupils for life in the employment market. Pupils ‘with learning difficulties’ were to be identified and given interventions at an early stage and the introduction of special teachers was to alleviate pupils in need of special support.

Finally, the third and final period is the shortest, 2014–2017. Education received a comparatively large room in the government statements analyzed here. This government inherited the formulation of the ‘knowledge crisis’ from the previous government, but chose to tackle it differently than the preceding government. Where the right-wing coalition worked at making teachers ‘better’ with, among other reforms, a new teacher education, this government aimed to have ‘more’ teachers. This was partly done by introducing incentives for people to join the teacher occupation, as well as incentives for practicing teachers to stay in it, for instance through ‘investments’ in the teacher profession, such as reduced administrative work, more adults in schools (albeit not necessarily teachers), smaller classes, specific governmental initiatives for higher teacher salaries. Terms such as equity and reduced segregation were outlined as keys to reverse the development and resources were aimed at particular areas and schools. Finally, as regards special education, regular teachers were to receive more education about special education, in the hope to alleviate the situation for pupils, in particular those with neuropsychiatric diagnoses. Thus special education was seen as being strengthened, not the least by education of more special education teachers.

This analysis of government statements confirms and further illustrates the shifts in the analyses by Lundahl (2005) and Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) presented above and summarizes the educational priorities of the different time-periods. It also illustrates that certain concepts, problems and solutions survive political shifts and are inherited by subsequent governments that then have to adapt their policies accordingly. In other words, education policy is not independent of – but rather marked by – prior policies and priorities (Hwang, 2002; Wedin, 2018). That is of course also likely to influence the organization of special education and inclusive education.

**Concluding discussion**

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the importance of the relationship between inclusive education to the overarching context of education policy. We have used prior analyses as well as our own analysis to illustrate how political tensions and priorities have led to varying definitions and ambitions as regards education, special education and inclusive education. The combined results presented above, highlight the importance of ongoing analyses of national education policies related to values of inclusive education and practical outcomes. Equally important is the illustration of the consequences when tensions between conflicting educational discourses are manifested in the school system. Below, we will to draw further conclusions from our analyses.
The discussion about inclusive education within current research is far from reaching consensus. Different definitions and approaches, both narrow and wide as regards who is encompassed by inclusive education, have been identified within the field of research. Also, the discourse of inclusive education, as framed by international agencies, has developed, moving from specific focus groups to wider emphasis on the purpose of education. Policy makers on national level are likely to pick and choose elements from these movements in order to both fulfil international agreements and adapt to the prerequisites within the local education system. Thus, rather than having a linear relationship of international policy through national policy to practice, the education system is the result of an interaction between politics, policy discourses and practice, that inform each other and adapt accordingly and over time (Figure 1).

In the case of inclusive education, one can view the field as moving and developing. The national and local policy in turn sets the agenda for the overarching time. However, being a result of compromises and political adaptions over a period of time (Ball, 1993), policy is also a matter for interpretation and enactment (Ball et al., 2012). Policy as regards inclusive education in Sweden is neither particularly explicit nor clarifying as also a matter for interpretation and enactment (Ball, 1993). However, being a result of compromises and political adaptions over a period of time (Ball, 1993), policy is also a matter for interpretation and enactment (Ball et al., 2012). Policy as regards inclusive education in Sweden is neither particularly explicit nor clarifying as also a matter for interpretation and enactment (Ball, 1993). However, it also competes with other political ambitions and ideals as regards education, and as our analysis illustrates, other ambitions tend to be prioritized on the political agenda. It is also clear that political fluctuations over time affect the educational priorities of the education system where some issues are left behind while other are inherited and/or adapted (cf. Hwang, 2002; Wedin, 2018). From that perspective, it is not surprising that the education system does not present a uniform image as regards inclusive education. However, that the segregation within the Swedish education system is increasing is disconcerting no matter what definition is used within the continuum of inclusive education. A conclusion can be drawn here, that even with the understanding of inclusive education as focusing on pupils with medical diagnoses and special needs, policy obviously leads to and allows organizational approaches that are not in line with ambitions to reduce segregating and excluding practices. This is not the least illustrated through the role assigned to special education within the expressed educational ambitions. A more broad understanding of inclusive education, aims to meet the social needs of all pupils and allowing them the opportunity to influence their school situation (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). When it comes to the school level, these goals seem difficult for schools to achieve, in part due to the room of interpretation given at every level of the school system.

The conclusions drawn from this is that research as regards inclusive education, whether it regards everyday practice or system level developments, has to acknowledge the currents of political prioritization and the development of policy environment, not only as regards inclusive education specifically, but also as regards education policy in general.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**ORCID**

Gunnlaugur Magnússon  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5079-9581

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**Figure 1.** The interaction between ideology, policy and practice.


