

From Salamanca to Sweden: inclusive education as policy in transit

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Introduction

When inclusive education was established as an international policy through the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), it was seen as a radical shift that would not only improve the situation for pupils traditionally falling under the scope of special education, but be conducive to alter education in general and the future society in particular (Ainscow et al., 2019). Developments in the almost 30 years since the signing of the Salamanca Statement have been complex and several promising international policy initiatives have followed. However, the implications for traditional understanding of the organization of schooling and teaching have varied greatly (de Bruin, 2019) and, in some countries, politicians, parents, and even teacher-unions increasingly question inclusion. This questioning often regards the efficiency of inclusion with respect to increasing educational attainment, as a matter of resources, as a matter of teacher proficiency, and as a matter of stigmatization or *othering*.

The sporadic development of inclusive education has several different reasons. One reason is the conceptual confusion surrounding inclusion, both as regards *whom* it focuses on and *how* it is to be organized (Magnússon, 2019). Also, the concept of inclusion has become positively loaded, in a similar manner as words such as democracy and liberty may be (Nilholm, 2006). As such, inclusion risks suffering the fate of elevator-words (Hacking, 1999), in the end not really referring to objects in the world, but giving a positive shine to that which it is attached to. For some proponents, inclusion therefore seems to have been kidnapped, rendering it meaningless (e.g., Skrtic et al., 1996), or as Slee expressed his concern: "... *that inclusive education is a casualty of a form of 'eduspeak' characterized by reductionism and disconnection and devoid of its original political intent*" (Slee, 2008, p. 104). Indications of this can be seen in how inclusion is used to signify a broad range of organizational practices, some of which are forms of segregation. Its radical political origins thus risk disappearing into oblivion (Slee, 2011).

However, semantics can only explain so much, there are material and organizational factors to account for as well. For instance, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has pointed to a lack of stable and longitudinal financial commitments and investments to further inclusion (Meijer and Watkins, 2019) which is likely to add to the stress of overworked teachers and the exposure of pupils who do not receive the support they need. Inclusion can also be seen as deprioritized in a political landscape that values and promotes economic efficiency, accountability, and standardization, (Apple, 2012; Blossing et al., 2014), and where position on international test measurements are seen as a national priority (Molstad and Pettersson, 2019). This latter development has been explained as the result of increased power of supranational policy-actors (Daun, 2011), global policy-networks (Ball, 2012), and international policy-borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). It is also the case that inclusive education was intended to be promoted by supranational policy-actors, policy-networks, and policy traveling and borrowing. This would indicate that inclusive education needs to be viewed in a broader policy-context where it competes for prioritization (Magnússon et al., 2019).

The varying successes of inclusion as education policy must therefore be analyzed more thoroughly, particularly if one wishes to promote inclusion as an important, democratic and radical alternative to traditional educational organization and education politics. Such analysis is the objective of this article, using Sweden as a case, with the premise that inclusive education is of relevance for several different types of practice (e.g., policy, research and schooling) and that within all of these fields, different actors view inclusion from different perspectives and with different needs and intentions.

Sweden is often raised as a beacon of inclusion in an international perspective (OECD, 2011, 2015). However, a series of market-oriented reforms in the past 30 years have contributed to increased segregation and decreased equity in the education system (Magnússon, 2015, 2020). Even more conspicuous with respect to the erosion of inclusion, is a recently instigated government inquiry (Swedish Government Official Reports 2020:42, 2020) for more segregated solutions within the school system, using the government sanctioned sentence "*the idea of inclusion has gone too far*" as a point of departure. This theme has in fact been increasingly prevalent in public debate about education in Sweden (Bagger and Lillvist, 2021). Hence, it can be argued that Sweden lives in a tension between its tradition of emphasis on social cohesion and inclusion, and a political hegemony emphasizing market-ideology of competition and efficiency (Magnússon and Pettersson, 2021).

In this chapter I will discuss fields of tension within inclusive education, and give examples of how these appear within research. I will then explain my theoretical approach to the concept. Thereafter, the Swedish education system is briefly described. Then, I will illustrate my argument about inclusion as a traveling international education policy embedded in a national and local policy context, with a summary of research and statistics from different levels of the Swedish education system. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

Fields of tension

The thoroughly discussed conceptual complexity of inclusive education can be partly explained by the broad application of the concept and its relevance to different types of practices on different levels. Besides being a policy-concept on international, national, regional and local levels, inclusion is also relevant to a large and diverse field of research and of course to the practical organization of education and teaching. For the aims of this article, inclusive education is viewed as a political ideal of education. As a political ideal, inclusive education embraces distinct normative beliefs about the purpose, the content, and organization of education. However, as I will illustrate below, inclusion as a field of research reflects neither a single nor homogenous ideology, but a range of understandings, not always explicitly stated, that vary greatly in both theory and practice (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002).

Inclusive education also encompasses several fields of tension. One of these fields concerns *who* is the focus of inclusion; which pupil-groups or population cohorts are identified as excluded and in need of being “included” (Florian, 2008; Hansen, 2012; Nilholm, 2006). In its broadest definition, the recognition of particular pupil-groups may be left outside the discussion and a general inclusive ambition raised focusing on democratic communities for “all” pupils. However, such approaches implicitly define pupil groups as not belonging to “all” pupils right now, and thus in need of politics and policies to be included (Popkewitz, 2009). The question of recognizing particular pupil groups pertains to a second field of tension that regards the relationship between inclusive education and special education (Magnússon, 2015). Some researchers argue that an identification and categorization of educational difficulties is in itself an excluding practice which often leads to pathologizing of pupil difference; hence it is antithetic to inclusion (e.g., Haug, 1998; Vislie, 2003; Thomas and Loxley, 2001). The argument is that the explanation of problems within the organization of schooling with individual characteristics of pupils—rather than contextual or organizational factors—will only reproduce the marginalization of vulnerable pupils (Skrtec, 1991; Ainscow, 1998). This approach to inclusion contains a radical questioning of the legitimacy of special education (Magnússon, 2015). However, other researchers argue that the political project of inclusive education should focus on pupils with special educational needs (e.g., Kiuppis, 2013; Miles and Singal, 2010), both due to the historical origins of the political process (Kiuppis, 2013) and to ensure that the particular needs of pupils with disabilities are not rendered invisible (Florian, 2019). Such an approach would be of particular importance in countries where access to education is limited in general and for pupils in need of special educational support in particular (Miles and Singal, 2010).

Over time, the meaning of inclusive education has become more encompassing, increasingly focusing on the notion of creating inclusion for “all children” (Kiuppis, 2013; Florian, 2019). An example of such widening focus of inclusion is found in Hope and Hall (2018) where inclusion is related to the experiences of LGBTQ students in a school specifically (and exclusively) accommodating LGBTQ students. It could therefore be argued that inclusion has developed into a political tool to acknowledge a variety of disadvantaged student groups (Engsig and Johnstone, 2015).

That relates to a third field of tension regarding how inclusive education should be organized and practiced. Several researchers have argued that inclusive education must not be reduced to the placement of the pupils (Ferguson, 2008; Haug, 1998; Slee, 2008; Thomazet, 2009; Vislie, 2003) and that “mainstreaming” (the placement of pupils in need of special support in regular classrooms) risks leading to experiences of exclusion if the placement is not accompanied by organizational resources and pedagogical measures to address the culture of the school and the participation of the pupils (Haug, 1998; Slee, 2011; Vislie, 2003). The question remains: how can research address inclusion both as a matter of mapping different practices and as a matter of improving inclusive education in everyday schooling (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm, 2020)?

It is therefore interesting to note the existence of a wide range of interpretations of the organizational conception of inclusion in research. For instance, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) noted four types of definitions of inclusive education among the most frequently cited research articles, spanning from a focus on the placement of SEN pupils in regular classrooms (mainstreaming), to the more abstract focus on “creating communities” for all pupils.

Later Nilholm and Göransson (2017) noted different definitions of inclusion in different types of research. Large-scale empirical and statistical studies usually used a placement-definition of inclusion, whereas theoretical and small-scale, qualitative articles used broader definitions. This finding was later confirmed by another study (Amor et al., 2018). This conceptual divide between different types of research can be understood through the following suggestion: different types of research need different conceptions of inclusion in order to operationalize it as, for instance, an analytical concept, a theoretical construct, or as a measureable variable. Large-scale register-studies or experimental studies need observable relationships between distinguishable variables, for example: the placement of pupils on the one hand and the knowledge-attainment or student learning outcomes on the other. In small-scale qualitative studies or theoretical developments of the concept of inclusion, broader and more abstract definitions are more applicable, or can even be the result of the inquiry. This variance can be seen as a challenge for inclusive education as a research field (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014), but it also illustrates inclusive education as a political project lacking a common goal specifically formulated for practice. Thus, further studies of how inclusion is conceptualized as a political project in policy, are needed.

Inclusive education as policy

There are a number of ways to view inclusive education. For instance, it can be seen as:

- a matter of bureaucratic organization—where the prerequisites for different pupils' education are regulated;
- as a matter of teaching and the practical choices of teachers;
- as a matter of philosophy regarding definitions of equity or what is “just” or “right”; and
- as a matter of activism and ambition to improve conditions for either specific pupil-groups or all pupils.

While I see a value in each of these perspectives, here inclusive education is viewed as education policy. Viewing inclusion as policy allows us to investigate its political statements about practice, organization and teaching. Each of these statements are in turn influenced by different philosophies and activism in different spheres and at different levels of policy-making and enactment. It also emphasizes the importance of policy on international, national, regional and local levels, and as negotiated and enacted on all levels.

Education policies illustrate political intentions and ideas about education, its aims, implementation and priorities. Policies are also inherently political as they concern distribution of resources, power and representation within the social field of education (Apple, 2004). Here, I follow Ball's definition of policies as statements about practice, “*intended to bring about idealized solutions to diagnosed problems*” (Ball, 1990, 26), a “*tinkering toward utopia*” of sorts (Tyack and Cuban, 1995) where political ideals about both society and education, are more or less explicitly stated. Hence, besides regulating and defining the framework of educational practice, education policies express assumptions about how pupils are to become citizens of and for society, and how that future society is to be constructed (Popkewitz, 2009).

Economic fluctuations and ideological issues, that change over time influence political ideas about education (Apple, 2004) and as political majorities shift, some policies prevail whereas others perish. However, policies are rarely written by sole actors, especially as regards education where longevity of policies is seen as a stabilizing factor for the education system. Policies thus often contain series of compromises between different political and non-political actors (Ball, 1993). This often leads to contradictory goals or measures that schools and staff must find ways to enact (Ball et al., 2012).

Tracing particular international policies and their consequences in practice, requires an analysis of the tension between general commonalities and local particularities. Any analysis of the traveling of international policies and political agendas is therefore not simply a matter of tracing implementation, but rather a consideration of the contextualization of the policies at different levels and among different actors. An international policy discourse doesn't translate directly into policy texts or practices in its original form, but is rather received and interpreted differently in varying national and regional contexts, constructed of political architectures, infrastructures, ideologies and institutions (Ball, 1998) and subsequently translated and enacted in local educational organization and practice. Wahlström and Sundberg (2018, p. 171) illustrate such traveling through a complex theoretical model, the points below being a modified, with the addition of the level of teacher-training, and simplified version of their model, using inclusive education and Sweden as an example. The list is not intended to be neither a normative hierarchy nor a chronological account. Rather it sketches some of the important levels a transnational policy transfers through.

- Inclusion is formulated as transnational policy at an international level by supra-national institutions (e.g., Salamanca Statement by UNESCO).
- Inclusive education is embedded in a context of political policies, organizational structures and traditions at the national level (e.g., Swedish education policy), where it competes for prioritization among other policies.
- Inclusive education becomes a subject of teacher-training, entering different organizational contexts and traditions, competing with and entered into other subjects (such as special education). Teacher-training is viewed here as an important level of policy transmission in education as it translates curriculum and legislation into the vocabulary and practices of future teachers.
- Inclusive education becomes a matter of policy making at the municipal level, or principal organizer level for privately run schools. In the decentralized Swedish education system, this is the level of resource allocation and organizational prioritizations, that will influence the practical and fiscal prerequisites for inclusion.
- Inclusive education becomes a matter of school-level and classroom-level practices where it is enacted in everyday work by individual teachers, principals, special educators and other staff, parents, and students. Each of these groups may have different interpretations of the concept of inclusion, but still have to enact and cooperate around it.

The Swedish education system

The Swedish education system encompasses preschool (ages 1–5 years) through primary school (6–16 years), to upper-secondary school (16–19 years), and adult education. Education is publicly funded and free of charge at all levels, with the exception of relatively low and income-related fees for preschool attendance. The concept of “pupil in need of special support” is central with regard to the provision of special education in the Swedish education system (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010: 800). While the legislation emphasizes attainment of knowledge-goals as a primary indicator of need for special support, “other reasons” such as behavioral and social difficulties are also

mentioned. The concept of special educational support thus encompasses a broad array of pupils in Sweden, that is, pupils with disabilities/diagnoses, learning difficulties, and pupils encountering difficulties reaching the knowledge-goals for a variety of other reasons. When suspicion of need for more extensive support arises, principals are legally accountable to initiate investigations and to secure documentation and ensure procedures for interventions are established and followed (**Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010: 800 § 3, 5, 7–12**). To a certain extent, this means that principals define and interpret what support is to be provided, to whom, and how. It is also of relevance that the Swedish system has several parallel educational tracks, for example state run special schools for pupils who use sign language due to hearing disabilities, and two types of schools for pupils with learning disabilities and severe learning disabilities (a diagnosis of intellectual disability is needed).

The concept of inclusion is not mentioned in the Swedish Education Act, (**Göransson et al., 2011; Isaksson and Lindqvist, 2015**), but it stipulates that special educational support should primarily be provided in the “regular” classroom if possible and that segregating measures deemed necessary should be temporary and restricted to particular subjects. Recent statistics show that roughly 1% of pupils are educated in segregated groups within their schools and that the proportion grows exponentially over age groups, with approximately 3% of the oldest primary school pupils receiving segregated support (**Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018**). As **Magnússon et al. (2019)** argue, one reason may be that inclusion is just one educational policy ideal among others and must be viewed in the general context of education policy and political prioritizations. One such factor is the increasing social segregation in the system which can be related to far-reaching market-reforms that shifted the focus of the education system from equity to efficiency (**Magnússon and Pettersson, 2021**). An example of the reduced ambitions for inclusion is the above-mentioned government report, investigating the possibilities of more segregating solutions in the school system, primarily “resource-schools” (i.e., temporary schools) and special-classes/groups (**Swedish Government Official Reports 2020:42, 2020**). This report follows both political prioritizations and increasingly negative public discourse in political debates on education (**Bagger and Lillvist, 2021**).

The education reforms that introduced marketization in the Swedish education system reflected concurrent international trends. The argument was that competition would lead to higher attainment, a plurality of actors and pedagogical development, and more efficiency (**Daun, 2003; Lundahl, 2005, 2010**). Thus, the system was decentralized, shifting the ownership and fiscal responsibility of schools from the state to municipalities and school-choice was introduced allowing private actors as principal organizers to own and run independent schools. From a policy perspective, independent schools are equivalent to municipal schools; they are subject to the Education Act and the state-defined curricula, and must fulfill the same goals as municipal schools (**Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010: 800**) with some exceptions. The municipalities finance pupils' education from preschool through upper-secondary school, via vouchers, a sum that covers expenses for the pupil's education at his/her school of choice and no additional tuitions or fees are allowed. Thus, pupils are in principle able to choose between different municipal and independent schools, although the supply of choices varies regionally. Some independent schools are profiled specifically toward pupils with different diagnoses (**Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014; Magnússon, 2015**) and while independent schools are supposed to be open to all pupils, different profiles and marketing strategies affect who applies to individual schools, and they have a legal-opening to refuse admittance to pupils with special needs.

From the international arena to local practices

In the following sections, I will summarize recent research, with a focus on Sweden to illustrate the complexities of how inclusion travels from an international policy to practice. The structure follows the description in the theoretical section of the article:

- an in-depth analysis of the Salamanca Statement (**UNESCO, 1994**);
- a contextualization of inclusion as an education policy among other Swedish policies;
- an example of how inclusion is organized in teacher-training;
- discussion of how different municipalities and principal organizers organize work of relevance to inclusion; and
- discussion of how different professions approach inclusion in the Swedish system.

Inclusion as international policy—the ambiguities of the Salamanca statement

The Salamanca Statement is a prime example of an international policy intended to influence national policies and local practices. As regards the development of inclusion, the Statement can be seen as the most important and most-referred to document, despite later developments of important international policies (**Graham et al., 2020**). However, despite the fact that the Salamanca Statement constitutes a foundational reference in both policy-making and research on inclusive education, its definition of inclusive education is not clear, neither as regards *who* is in focus of inclusion, nor as regards *how* it should be organized. A recently published article (**Magnússon, 2019**), analyzed the Salamanca Statement, illustrating how inclusion is not only formulated as a solution of the particular educational problem of arbitrary segregation of pupils to special educational provision within contemporary schooling, but also as a solution to problems of future society via the formation of future citizens. Thus, schools are not only supposed to educate children in particular subjects, but also to raise democratically thinking, tolerant, inclusive, and employable citizens that will participate in the future democratic society.

The Statement is also permeated by several different types of political ideals, of conservative, liberal and left-wing origins (**Magnússon, 2019**). For instance, education is both formulated as a public good, necessary to construct the future democratic society, and

as a private good, where parents are described as privileged partners who should exercise choice. The arguments to motivate inclusion are even embedded in economic terminology, such as efficiency and cost-effectiveness, along with ethical and democratic justification of the suggested political objectives.

As regards *who* is in focus of the statement, its roots in special education are clear, the subtitle being “Framework for Action on Special Needs Education”. The document is therefore largely focused on pupils with different disabilities and learning difficulties. Therefore, using the Salamanca Statement, one could argue that inclusion is about what would be termed pupils in need of special support in Sweden. However, the Statement also states that:

... schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

UNESCO (1994, 6).

In other words, inclusion can also be regarded as encompassing “all children”, albeit with a focus on children seen as disadvantaged. All of the groups mentioned above can be said to fall outside the norm of the exemplary pupil, so the Statement can be said to both define the “normal” or “desired” pupil, along with pupils seen as excluded. Hence, the Statement can be seen as formulating the idea of “*who we are, should be and who is not that 'we'*” yet (Popkewitz, 2009).

As regards the organization of inclusion, the Statement's Framework for Action, includes guidelines ranging from policy to teaching, services, teacher-training and material resources. While the overarching concern is access (of children with disabilities) to education, the Statement also argues for attendance in the same schools and classrooms. A narrow interpretation of the Statement could therefore view inclusion as primarily a matter of placing pupils with disabilities in regular schools and classrooms. However, the Salamanca Statement provides ample room for interpretation, allowing for segregated educational provision and limitation to placement. The Statement urges governments to enroll all children in regular schools, “*unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise*” (UNESCO, 1994, ix) and that every person with disabilities should have the right to express their wishes regarding education “*as far as this can be ascertained*” (UNESCO, 1994, 6). Some additional articles discuss the necessity of separate educational provisions in special schools and establishments for particular individuals, or pupils with particular disabilities (Magnússon, 2019, 686). In other words, the Statement can also be used to argue for segregated educational provision based on categories of difference.

The summary of Magnússon's analysis states that the notion of inclusion in this international and influential policy-document “*encompasses a range of ideals and generally formulated decrees for educational practice*” ranging from “*specific definitions and focus on the placement of pupils with special needs or disabilities in regular classrooms, to broader ideals of 'creating communities' for all pupils*” (Magnússon, 2019, 687). There are arguments pertaining to different political ideologies—it is an “*amalgam of ideals*” that “*allows for a multitude of interpretations of what inclusion can mean*” (Magnússon, 2019). The conclusion is that this may be by design. An international policy that wishes to influence several hundred national and regional education systems needs to be malleable. However, “*(g)iven the lack of clarity and general formulations, The Salamanca Statement risks serving as a foundation from which policy-makers (and researchers) can select in order to legitimize definitions of inclusion that may not be very inclusive for pupils*” (Magnússon, 2019, 686).

Inclusion in a Swedish policy-context

Several researchers have pointed out the necessity of viewing international education policies, such as inclusive education, as something that enters into an existing policy-context, with national and regional traditions, cultures, and prioritizations (Ball, 1998; Slec, 2011). The following summary, attempts such contextualization.

There has been a long tradition of emphasis on equal access, equity and equality in the Swedish education system (Lundahl, 2005; Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006), and Sweden has long been internationally renowned for having an inclusive and equitable education system. However, developments in the past 30 years indicate that this reputation is based upon old merits, and that the education system is in fact decreasingly inclusive and increasingly segregated (OECD, 2015). In fact, education reforms and policies of the past three decades have emphasized individualization, efficiency, fiscal cuts, liberal notions of equality and inclusion, and increased social segregation (Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006; Blossing et al., 2014; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2018; Dovemark et al., 2018). Several researchers have also pointed to increased social segregation as a result of school-choice and decentralization in Sweden. Schools are becoming more homogenous in terms of pupils' socio-economic background, ethnicity, and gender, as well as increased disparities in attainment and educational resources (Andersson et al., 2012; Bunar, 2010; Fjellman, 2019; Trumberg, 2011). Recent studies have also showed increased levels of segregation of pupils in need of special support (Magnússon, 2015, 2020, Ramberg, 2015; Tah, 2019). This appears in several manners. First of all, independent schools can legally deny admission to pupils in need of support for economic or organizational reasons. According to Magnússon (2015), approximately 15% of all independent primary schools had done so, although the numbers varied between different profiles and ranged to over 40% among certain school-profiles. Also, there was apparent clustering of pupils in need of special support at specific types of schools and hence fewer at other types of schools (Magnússon, 2015, 2019). In addition, a parallel-market of independent schools has profiles marketed specifically toward special support has grown forth, leading to further clustering of pupils at such schools (Magnússon et al., 2014; Tah, 2019). Finally, the resources for and provision of special support (such as educated special needs teachers) varies greatly between both primary and secondary schools and has relation to whether or not the schools are publicly run or privately run (Magnússon, 2015, 2016; Magnússon et al., Ramberg, 2015).

To understand how inclusive education as an international policy affects Swedish policy, we must look at how inclusion is formulated in the legal and curricular framework of education. For instance, the word inclusion is not mentioned in any of the most important governing documents of education in Sweden, and education policies are far from clear as regards more inclusive goals of education (Göransson et al., 2011; Isaksson and Lindqvist, 2015). While conceptions of inclusive ideals of education can be found in general terms in Swedish policy (Lundahl et al., 2013), these are open for interpretation on both municipal and school level in the decentralized Swedish education system.

Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) conducted an analysis of special education in Swedish education policy and illustrated how the conception of special education fluctuates with political and discursive societal shifts. For instance, they argue that policies emphasizing mainstreaming and integration against segregated solutions followed a general critique of the traditional special education in the 1970s and up until the 1990s. However, they argue that developments in the late 1990s led to a dislocation in education policy where increased individualist focus and new views on school difficulties arose, leading to an increased demand for medical and health-related expert-knowledge. The period between mid-2000s and 2014, was in turn marked by intense and frequent reforms of all levels of the Swedish education system. During these reforms, the idea of inclusion was openly questioned and criticized and a focus on knowledge attainment and international tests arose (Isaksson and Lindqvist, 2015).

An analysis of 23-years of Swedish government-statements (Magnússon et al., 2019) further illustrated the importance of shifts of political discourse. The “knowledge-crisis” that followed a Swedish drop in the PISA-studies was used to justify far-reaching reforms of the education system, from preschool to teacher-training, and the notion of knowledge-crisis was inherited by succeeding governments. While right-wing governments emphasized quality, choice and “better teachers”, left-wing governments tended to emphasize equality and more teachers (or more adults). Inclusion was never mentioned in any of the analyzed statements. When special education was mentioned, it was discussed as a matter of increasing teacher-competence and to accommodate disadvantaged pupils in the system. Magnússon et al. (2019) argued that as policy, inclusion is a moving and developing field and subject to political shifts on national and local levels. Thus, inclusion “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” (Magnússon et al., 2019).

Finally, increased segregation in the education system is a matter of concern, whatever definition of inclusion is preferred. That leads to another analysis of inclusive education and the marketization of the Swedish education system (Magnússon, 2020). Here, all articles from Sweden that reported empirical research about either marketization in general or school-choice in particular and special education or inclusive education were analyzed. The marketization of the Swedish education system has been described as a paradigm shift in Swedish education politics (Englund, 1998; Daun, 2003) and as mentioned above, the correlation between the increased segregation and decreased equity in the system on the one hand and the rise of school-choice and market policies on the other hand is well established. As mentioned above, this increased segregation regards both pupils' socioeconomic and ethnic background, gender, need of support, pupil attainment and the availability of pedagogical resources (staff and learning materials). As Magnússon (2020, 28–29) explains: “This relates to special education, as attainment is central to the definition of the need for special educational support in Sweden.” And that “Similar to international patterns, pupils with lower socio-economic background and with migrant-backgrounds are overrepresented among SEN-pupils in Sweden (...) groups that exercise choice to a lower degree.”

The article concludes that increased segregation of the system affects inclusion in several ways; in particular, the clustering of pupils in need of support at specific schools, their corresponding absence from other schools, and the growing market of independent special schools. Marketization has not led to innovative ways of organizing special support more inclusively, rather traditional organization of special education is reproduced and strengthened in the system and the choices for pupils in need of support are limited. Independent schools also recruit special education teachers and special pedagogues to a much lower degree than municipal schools do (Magnússon et al., 2018; Ramberg, 2015). For an education system often renowned for its inclusivity and equity, these results are dire.

As Magnússon and Pettersson (2021) argue, this illustrates a shift where traditional educational ideals have been given new meanings, including how the public and private are conceptualized. The reproduction and strengthening of traditional special education can therefore also be understood as a consequence of the emphasis of individual choice, attainment and efficiency in an increasingly marketized system as the responsibility for education is privatized to individual or family-preferences. When pupils choose segregated provision of education, it is legitimized as a matter of supply-and-demand rather than as an indicator of the need for development of more inclusive educational environments. Hence the market supplies what Norwich (2000) termed as “elective inclusion/exclusion”. In other words, pupils and parents are given the power to opt out of “inclusive” educational environments.

Inclusion in Swedish teacher-training

The importance of teacher competence to accommodate an increasingly diverse pupil-population is a common theme in education politics, and thus the importance of teacher-training is an important matter, in particular in light of the Swedish “knowledge-crisis”. In Sweden, teacher-training is a matter of constant debate (Edling and Liljestrand, 2019; Rytzler and Magnússon, 2020) and has been reformed several times during the last 30 years (Hallsén, 2013). As Hallsén (2013) points out, teacher-training reforms are often intended to deliver teachers the system needs to fulfill its expectations, or to contribute to the development of the system rather than to organize training of autonomous professionals prepared to utilize professional knowledge, competence and discretion.

The common denominator for primary and upper-secondary levels and teacher-training is the idea that schools are supposed to shape future citizens (Popkewitz, 2009). Hence, there are concerns that teacher students are not prepared for the task after graduation, and a skepticism toward teacher educators and educational research (Labaree, 2004). This can also be understood as educationalization of

social problems, i.e., education is intended to solve both current and future societal problems (Smeyers and Depaepe, 2008; Popkewitz, 2008).

Here inclusion as policy is viewed as an attempt to address present economic and social problems. Thus, aside from preparing teachers to disseminate important knowledge to the next generation, teacher-training must also prepare accountable, efficient and independent teachers (Molstad and Proitz, 2019) to deal with and prevent future social problems. It therefore is important to study how teacher-training organizes inclusion. Miškolci et al. (2020) argue that universities have three options for organizing inclusion in teacher-training:

- (1) to incorporate the topic into all or several courses;
- (2) to have a particular course focusing on inclusion (or special education), or
- (3) a combination of the two approaches.

This varies between different universities in Sweden, but inclusion is commonly connected to special education, no matter which approach is used. Thus, inclusive education will often be a subject in a course or lectures on special education, rather than within for instance courses or lectures on teaching or the organization of schooling. This has not been a matter of much research in the Swedish context, but a recent study (Miškolci et al., 2020) made a case study of a Swedish university. Key-actors among both teaching and administrative staff, and students from all teacher-training programs—preschool, primary school and upper-secondary school—were interviewed.

According to the respondents, the university approached the concept of inclusion and education of diverse pupil groups purposefully, both by infusing it through different courses and through a specific course on special education. However, the respondents identified a need for more on inclusion, especially its implications for teaching practices and to understand the relationship between special education and inclusion, and between disability/learning difficulties and diversity in general. In particular, students seemed to view special education and inclusive education as mutually complementary in an uncritical manner. The study concluded that a recent education reform, which called for more special education in teacher-training, had created a hierarchy between inclusive education and special education, prioritizing the latter. Rather than challenging this hierarchy, the studied university had developed and incorporated special education courses in their teacher-training programs. As teacher-training is a space in which the future school is hierarchized and shaped, this acceptance of political influence over course-structure and syllabi is revealing as regards the de-prioritization of inclusive education and the tension among these contradictory educational policies risks constraining the university's capacity to prepare its teacher candidates to develop inclusive practices (Miškolci et al., 2020).

Inclusion as an organizational question

Existing comparative studies of how municipalities and private principal organizers interpret and enact Swedish policies regarding inclusion are unfortunately based upon relatively old data. However, some general indicators can be gleaned from them. First of all, the number of pupils receiving special support in Sweden has historically been high. Giota and Lundborg (2007) estimated that approximately 40% of pupils had received special support at some time during their compulsory school education, and figures indicated approximately 20% of compulsory school pupils are seen as being in need of support at any specific time (Giota and Lundborg, 2007; Nilholm et al., 2007). Until 2014, 14% of pupils in primary schools had intervention plans for special support (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2013), but following a legislative alteration in 2014, that number had dropped to 5% in 2018/2019 (Swedish Government Official Reports 2020:42, 2020) and teachers were intended to adapt more of their teaching without documentation. Segregating measures have been deemed to be on the increase over a long period (Heimdahl Mattson, 2006; Giota and Lundborg, 2007; Nilholm et al., 2007; Emanuelsson and Persson, 2002; Emanuelsson et al., 2002; Magnússon, 2015).

Results from Giota and Emanuelsson's (2011) showed that 25% of principals in independent schools claimed that fiscal resources for special support were insufficient, and Magnússon (2016) argued that the different models of financing special support in the Swedish system was a problem for the equity of the system often raised by independent schools. Comparisons of municipal and independent schools indicate that proportions of pupils in need of special support are higher in municipal schools than in independent schools and that independent schools use segregated groups to a higher degree (Magnússon, 2015, 2020; Ramberg, 2015). There has also been a general tendency to attribute school problems to pupils and pupils in need of special support in all types of schools. Thereby, risk is further marginalized through segregation as an organizational solution (Nilholm et al., 2007; Giota and Emanuelsson, 2011; Magnússon, 2015). Schools with a particular focus on special support are becoming more common and receive increased legitimacy through parental choice (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). These schools claim to take care of pupils whom “the regular school” has failed, pupils who have thus “opted out” (Magnússon, 2015, 2016). This is yet another indicator of increased segregation at the system level (Giota and Emanuelsson, 2011)—in this case, based on the need for special support. An additional risk is that special educational competence may become concentrated at special schools and that other schools may either not be able (or willing) to attain, retain, and develop appropriate competence.

In the light of recent fiscal austerity, there are increasing worries about the economic stability of the education system, particularly as regards consequences for equity. These concerns can be seen among both local politicians and principals who are economically responsible for the schools (Swedish Government Official Reports 2017: 35, 2017; Lärarnas, 2019; Plesner and Larsson, 2019). The consequences of austerity are larger classes, fewer and less qualified teachers, and teaching materials of diminishing quality. This along with recent political moves questioning inclusion as a goal for education (Swedish Government Official Reports 2020:42, 2020) indicates that inclusion has a double function on this level. On the one hand, it is a policy that is to a large degree up to the principal

organizers and municipalities to interpret and enact in their organizations. In the decentralized Swedish education system, that means that several different approaches exist simultaneously, not always fulfilling the legislative demands (**Swedish School Inspectorate, 2014, 2016**). On the other hand, it is used as a term for the placement of pupils in regular classes and thus as justification for downscaling support services. Hence, inclusion at best becomes a secondary objective or, at worst, a justification for fiscal austerity, far departed from its original political intent.

Inclusion in practice of different professions

Schools can be viewed as complex social systems in their own right, constantly being negotiated and reorganized by the people who work and live within them—from principals, teachers, assistants, kitchen staff, leisure-time leaders, janitors, counsellors, to parents, pupils and external staff. The involvement of all occupational groups and the importance of school leadership has long been emphasized in research on inclusion (e.g., **Topping and Maloney, 2005**), but here I will focus on principals, teachers, and special educators.

The importance of school leadership for the quality of schooling is well established, both regarding learning, organization and development of inclusion (**Leithwood et al., 2008; Seashore Louis, 2015; Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; Persson and Persson, 2012**), in particular with regard to sustainability of organizational development. Swedish principals have a legal responsibility for the organization and implementation of special support, health promotion and preventive measures (**Swedish Code of Statutes 2010: 800**). Thus, the development of an inclusive school environment is to a high degree the principals' responsibility. It is therefore of concern in the Swedish context that 60% of principals have left their position within 3 years, and 80% have done so within 5 years (**Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020**). Many principals find that they are limited in their leadership by certain policies (**Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2013**) and that they lack authority in economic issues and personnel decisions (**Nihlfors and Johansson, 2013**). In a more recent study, **Magnússon and Pettersson (2021)** reported results from interviews with 22 head teachers of primary schools about inclusion and the market. Most of the principals defined inclusion in terms of goal attainment and “reaching one's full potential”, a clear market-influenced formulation with focus on the individual, while others focused more on the societal role of schools, and as a matter of community at the school. The definition of *who* was to be included varied as well, from a broad socially-oriented definition focusing on accommodating newly-arrived refugees and integrating different cultures and religions to a focus on pupils requiring special educational support. An in-common reasoning was that inclusion should not revolve too much around pupil-placement as separating pupils into segregated teaching environments was seen as conducive to their knowledge-attainment; that is, a view of participation in special groups as a manner of organizing inclusion. When it came to the influence of the market on inclusion some principals proclaimed that the idea of inclusion had been ruined by school-choice due to the segregating consequences of the market. Others viewed successful inclusion in their schools, as a tool for competing in the market. In the second case, it can be argued that inclusion is seen more as means to an end, rather than an end in-and-of-itself. Inclusion was in other words a matter of reputation rather than pedagogical objective.

There are several differences in how different professions define and explain special support (**Lindqvist et al., 2011; Lindqvist, 2013a**). Some prior research indicates that school difficulties are often explained in terms of the pupils' individual attributes rather than organizational factors by principals and teachers, with the exception of the special educators (**Lindqvist, 2013a,b; Nilholm et al., 2013; Magnússon and Göransson, 2019**). In fact, the differences are so great that **Lindqvist et al. (2011)** indicate that different professions have different agendas for special support and inclusion. Special educators tend to express values and opinions in line with a more inclusive perspective (**Lindqvist et al., 2011; Lindqvist, 2013a; Nilholm et al., 2013; Göransson et al., 2015**). This has led to a general view of special educators as being more inclusive and having similar views, but **Göransson et al. (2019)** showed that despite this there are several differences within the group.

While the special educators are often seen as important for the development of inclusive education, their role is not defined in the Swedish Education Act, and no demands are made for them to be employed by schools. This has also led to common misunderstandings among school staff regarding their role (**Magnússon and Göransson, 2019**) and, it seems that special educators shape and adapt their occupational roles to the demands of the school they work at (**Göransson et al., 2015; Klang et al., 2017**). Given that both principals and teachers tend to be less positive toward inclusion and more in favor of traditional special education, special educators are likely to be working in organizational frameworks they do not deem appropriate (**Lindqvist, 2013b; Göransson et al., 2015**). Here it is also of relevance to remember that Swedish independent schools employ special educators, the professions most inclined to inclusive values, to a much lower extent than municipal schools in Sweden (**Magnússon et al., 20184; Ramberg, 2015**). This is likely both because special educators have higher salaries and are therefore an expensive resource for schools, and because they come from the pool of experienced teachers, and Sweden has been experiencing an increasing shortage of certified teachers. Of course, this affects the pupil/teacher ratio, which leads to larger classes and work that is more intensive for individual teachers. Independent schools also tend to have a lower proportion of certified teachers (**OECD, 2015; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019**). The decline has been explained with increased bureaucratization and distrust in the professional competence of teachers (**OECD, 2015**), and has also been related to the marketization of education, which increases dimensions of customer-service and a standardized, goal and results-driven enterprise in the work of teachers (**Beach et al., 2014; Nilsson-Lindström and Beach, 2015**).

To summarize, teachers and principals tend to be less enthusiastic toward inclusive education than special educators are. There is also increased stress within the system, particularly in the retention of principals; those who are legally accountable for inclusive organization, and teachers, who are to adapt their teaching to increasingly diverse pupil groups in ever-larger classes with limited support. Special educators, who are generally positive toward inclusion, are a scarce resource within the system, and practically non-existent at certain

schools. These stressors are detrimental to the development of inclusive education at school level. There are significant differences between schools with respect to inclusive education in the decreasingly equitable Swedish education system.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to illustrate the complexities of inclusive education as a policy that travels from an international arena to the level of practice in local schools, using Sweden as an example. I've summarized some of the ambiguities in the original formulations of inclusive education in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and argued that these allow for different interpretations of what is considered inclusive in different contexts. More importantly, I've shown how national Swedish education politics have shifted in the past three decades, from equity and inclusion as a national priority toward a more individualized and marketized system, characterized by increasing inequity and social segregation, negatively affecting disadvantaged pupil groups. In the years since the Salamanca Statement (1994), inclusion has not been a prioritized policy in Sweden, it is not even explicitly mentioned in political statements or primary education policies or legislation. The prevalence of segregating methods and organizational solutions is common and increasing among both municipal and private principal organizers. Recent political signals from the government also undercut inclusion as a political ambition. Finally, both principals and teachers are experiencing increased stress as a result of both external demands, fiscal austerity, and the questioning of their professional autonomy—this is visible through high turnover and a deficit of certified teachers. Additionally, the occupational groups most inclined to inclusive values are scarce, often misunderstood, and often working in organizations that do not prioritize inclusion. The prerequisites for inclusive education on all levels in Sweden are therefore deficient and there are no signals of a political will to emphasize inclusive ambitions.

While this image is bleak, the primary contribution of this article is threefold. First, it utilizes an analytical approach that can be adapted and developed further to illustrate the nuance and interplay between international policies and national and local prerequisites for education practice in line with these policies in general and as regards inclusion in particular. Second, it illustrates the importance of contextualization of education policies in general, and inclusive education in particular at national and local levels. Further and more nuanced analyses of how these policies are enacted are needed however, but here the prerequisites are made visible. Finally, by showing both ambiguities of policies, and the contextualization of these throughout complex education systems, we can identify challenges to the radical political potential of inclusive education in policy and practice and attempt to address them. A good starting-point would be the material prerequisites provided to develop inclusion. Without provision of resources, policies may lead to the antithesis of inclusion. Another would be to request that policy-makers and practitioners be more explicit with their ambitions as regards inclusion. Finally, more attention needs to be directed to the development of inclusive practices and organization.

Uncited reference

Mølstad and Pettersson, 2018.

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