Inclusive Education in Sweden: Policy, Politics, and Practice

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Content

Abstract

Swedish education policy has traditionally been underpinned by a strong philosophy of universalism, equal entitlements of citizenship, and solidarity as an instrument to promote social inclusion and equality. However, over the past decades, Sweden has undergone a dramatic transformation. The aim of this paper is to trace the development of inclusive education in Sweden from the 1990s to today. Based on research literature and sources, including statistics, the authors discuss the last three decades of Swedish education policy and practice, in which they identify a tendency towards the marginalisation and segregation of vulnerable student groups. The relevant factors are disability, gender, migration, and social background. Regarding inclusion, gaps between political intention and implementation exist. Although inclusion in education is a self-evident right, the authors conclude that this cannot be equated with inclusive education. Enormous efforts are necessary to foster inclusive learning environments that acknowledge, celebrate, and further develop the strengths of all learners.

Introduction

For decades, Sweden was considered internationally as a model of the social equitable, fair, and progressive school system, and the well-known, catchy slogan "one school for all" captured this endeavour. In this context, international observers also valued the services for people with disabilities, as expressed in concepts such as integration and normalisation. This external view was often embedded in an appreciative perspective of the Swedish welfare state – the *folkhem* – which has its roots in the first half of the 20th century.

However, after the historical turning point of 1989/1990, fundamental and far-reaching changes took place in many eastern and east-central European countries, and Sweden also underwent changes, though few were visible on the surface. Neoliberal concepts such as new public management arose and had an impact on schools and education. Phenomena such as globalisation and the information technology revolution also affected Sweden, and now, at the beginning of the 2020s, Swedish society differs fundamentally from that which existed around 1990.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the development of the Swedish school system with respect to inclusive education from the 1990s until today. This is relevant to understanding the current situation and future perspectives. In this context, we discuss the following questions:

- What has characterised the development of Swedish education policy and politics with respect to inclusion in education over the last three decades?
- How do actors in the field of education and special education use the term "inclusive education"?
- What developments and tendencies have become visible in educational practice?

This paper draws on compulsory education in Swedish schools with a view to producing a narrative synthesis of the historical development and current situation. At the same time, the text can be understood as an introduction to contemporary inclusive and special education in Sweden. We include research literature and other sources, such as official statistics. The main themes of our analyses arise from knowledge of the field and reflect contemporary scientific and political debates.

Our research is anchored in the concept of justice "as equality of outcomes across social groups" (Kerr & Rafflo, 2016, p. 19) in terms of achievement. Additionally, we view justice as "equitable processes in meeting the needs of diverse individuals" (ibid., p. 20). This approach is in line with Swedish societal and educational traditions and highlights the "compensatory principle, i.e., that the state should not remain neutral in issues relating to equal opportunity" (Wildt-Persson & Rosengren, 2001, p. 301). This perspective is applicable to geographical regions, as well as to social and economic groups.

An overview of contemporary Swedish education policy

Over the last three decades, we have distinguished three phases of education policy that have had an impact on students in difficult learning situations: the reforms of the 1990s, the neoliberal education policy of 2006–2014, and the current ambiguous tendencies regarding inclusion.

The reforms of the 1990s

In Sweden, international changes in the early 1990s resulted in economic crises, which were noticeable in the high unemployment rate and economic cutbacks in education, among other fields. Already in 1989, the Social Democratic minority government, supported by the Left Party, imposed the communalisation of schools. In 1992, a right-wing coalition implemented the so-called free school reform, leading to flourishing private schools. From the mid-1990s, the Education Act and the curricula were among the few regulations in existence at the national level. Since then, marketisation, free choice, and competition have characterised the education system, mirroring a "radically different education policy" (Egelund, Haug, & Persson, 2006, p. 136; all translations in this paper done by the authors) and leading to "negative trends" (Westling Allodi, 2017, p. 111). Since then, the specific shaping of educational institutions has been in the hands of municipalities and its bureaucrats, school principals, and teachers. Accordingly, a wide variety of school profiles developed.

An example of new public management, testing, and output orientation in schools is the nationally administered exams that have been implemented since 1997. These assessments take place in grades 3, 6, and 9 of compulsory school. Scholars criticised these tests as leading to special education needs (SEN) categorisations (Giota, Lundborg, & Emanuelsson, 2009) and conflicting with the "one school for all" approach (Engström, 2003).

The local shaping of SEN policies varies enormously. Approximately 10 years ago, Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson (2011) concluded that "*national policies and practices leave a lot of room for interpretation at municipal and school levels, which generates vast differences*" (p. 550; italics in the original). The Swedish education system is characterised by heterogeneity at the municipal and school levels.

The significance of background factors in relation to the education reforms of the 1990s has been discussed critically. Gustafsson (2006) concluded that for the period 1992–2000, there was a consistent and linear increase in school segregation based on grades, immigration, and educational background. The Swedish National Agency for Education remarked critically that the reforms of the 1990s had "undesirable side effects" (Skolverket, 2009, p. 34), in particular the tendencies of segregation and the increasing impact of students' social backgrounds. This finding is in line with research by Yang Hansen, Rosén, and Gustafsson (2011), who emphasise the significance of socioeconomic status on reading achievement. Other studies have indicated that there is an over-representation of students with immigrant backgrounds and/or social disadvantaged students in special schools (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012). There is, however, a need for further research concerning strategies to handle and minimise the influence of social, ethnic, and other background factors.

Neoliberal education reforms: 2006–2014

The performances of Swedish students in international comparative studies, such as PISA and TIMSS, were already on the decline when the new right-wing coalition took office in 2006. The unsatisfying results in the knowledge tests led to an atmosphere of uncertainty, which became more pronounced as the decrease in achievement continued (Henrekson & Jävervall, 2017; OECD, 2015). The new education minister from the Liberal Party soon identified the culprit for the poor results: the *flumpedagogik* (a polemic term for an alleged left wing-orientated education without a knowledge focus); the lack of teacher-centred instruction; and the training of teachers and special educational needs coordinators (SENCO). The expert report produced by the Carlbeck Committee (SOU 2004:98), which recommended deepened cooperation between compulsory schools and special schools for students with intellectual disabilities, disappeared from the political agenda. Instead, numerous neoliberal reform projects started and included a new Education Act, revised curricula for all school forms, and reformed teacher education.

By 2008/2009, some universities had already resumed the formerly abdicated special teacher education as a complement to the SENCO programme (Rosenqvist, 2010). The reformed general teacher training programme, implemented in 2011, neglected questions of inclusion and special education. Specifically, it abolished the opportunity to study the elective subject special education. Only exceptional universities maintained a focus on inclusion in general teacher education (Persson & Barow, 2012).

The Education Act of 2010 (SFS 2010:800) maintained an inclusive approach, although the terms "inclusion" or "inclusive education" appear nowhere within it. It indicates that special support should be given to the group to which the students in question belong. However, the Education Act calls for the implementation of special classes for "specific reasons" (ibid., Chapter 3, § 11).

The new curriculum, Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2018a), which was introduced in 2011, retained many of its predecessor's provisions. An important example is the requirement to differentiate teaching according to the various learning requirements, particularly regarding students with learning difficulties. However, the former curriculum included schools for students with intellectual disability. Since 2011, this type of school has had its own syllabus again, indicating its status as a school form of its own.

The ambiguity of the present

After the red–green minority government took power in 2014, the pace of educational reform decreased significantly. The first cabinet (2014–2019) supported the in-service training and professional development of teachers in special education, organised by the Swedish National Agency for Education. Moreover, neuropsychiatric disorders became a mandatory topic in the training of special educators and SENCOs. Early support measures in Swedish and mathematics are now guaranteed by law (Prop. 2017/18:195). However, in the proposals of the School Commission of 2015 (SOU 2017:35), questions regarding inclusive education played only a subordinate role.

In contrast, a juridical conflict between the Municipality of Linköping and the Swedish School Inspectorate in the years 2014–2017 influenced special education provision. The municipality operates six resource schools for students with SEN. The School Inspectorate questioned these small groups and emphasised the risk that segregated education could become permanent. The Municipality of Linköping rejected the School Inspectorate's threat of economic punishment, went to court, and lost the legal case in the first and second juridical instances. Finally, the Supreme Administrative Court set aside the judgment of the lower instances and agreed with the municipality. According to the court's decision, the existence of resource schools is compatible with the Education Act (Högsta Förvaltningsdomstolen, 2017). This judgment highlights the freedom of municipalities to shape local education policy. Moreover, it illustrates the different ways in which the Education Act can be interpreted.

Since 2019, Sweden has been ruled by a minority government of Social Democrats and the Green Party, on certain issues supported by the Center Party and the Liberals. According to the government statement (Regeringen, 2019), it will become easier to obtain special support in small groups. There are plans to develop resource schools and to reinforce schools for students with intellectual disability. Not surprisingly, this policy was heavily criticised by several scientists (e.g., Hausstätter, 2019; Magnússon, 2019). Critics point to misunderstandings regarding the term *inclusion*, highlighting the concept's embeddedness in a human rights approach, while disability activists are split. The Swedish Disability Rights Federation (Wallenius, 2019) is aligned with the aforementioned scientists, demanding school development and placing its hopes on the Social Democratic education minister. Others, including "Attention", which is an organisation for people with neuropsychiatric disorders, welcome this special education policy (Attention, 2019). However, it remains to be seen how the policy, which is a compromise statement of intent of diverse parties, will be implemented in practice, particularly with respect to the municipalities' freedom to interpret national directives. The situation today illustrates that with regard to inclusive education, there is a lack of societal consensus.

The challenge of inclusion

Diversity in education is by no means a new phenomenon, but policies have changed over time. Since the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, the term *inclusive education* has dominated the debate in Sweden and internationally. However, no consistent definition of its content exists.

Attempts to define inclusion and inclusive education

The debates on inclusive education in Sweden and internationally characterise a variety of definitions of the term (e.g., Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). This terminological confusion impedes fruitful dialogue, thus bearing the risk of conceptual arbitrariness. At the same time, this linguistic ambiguity hampers empirical research in the field. In Sweden, different definitions of *inclusive education* and similar terms exist. In this section, we will examine some central positions.

In the late 1990s, Haug (1998) introduced the expression *including integration* (*inkluderande integrering*), which is based on social justice and means that education ought to take place in the ordinary classroom. However, he acknowledged the risk that the mere presence of all children in the same class and the absence of pedagogical differentiation can lead to exclusion. For a successful outcome to be achieved, education has to be adapted to the individual needs of all students. Haug (2012) outlined the term *inclusion* as existing at the levels of the state, municipality, school, and class, and in the domains of community, participation, collaboration, and exchange.

In a research overview, Nilholm (2006) differentiated between the terms *integration* and *inclusion*. This distinction has far-reaching consequences for the conceptualisation of schooling. Nilholm points to the embeddedness of the term *inclusion* in political, philosophical, and democratic concepts but does so without offering his own definition. Based on his awareness of the varying meanings, Nilholm warns against the abuse of the term *inclusion*.

Based on a case study, Asp-Onsjö (2006) suggested a distinction between spatial, social, and didactical inclusion. This differentiation was widely disseminated, including via master's theses written by special education students, but its focus on only the classroom was both a strength and a weakness. Ahlberg (2013) and Barow (2013) proposed an orientation towards the UNESCO (2009) definition of inclusive education as "a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners" (p. 8). Here, the structure, organisation, and development of schools play a significant role.

Although there are discernible differences in how inclusion is defined, striking similarities exist. Most of the aforementioned scholars have their professional origins in special education. This is a dilemma in itself, as the matter of what inclusion stands for is neglected. These discursive differences are, for the most part, necessary reform processes within general education. As long as special education dominates the discourse on inclusion, there are both risks of ambivalent developments in policy clarity and applications.

From inclusion to inclusive learning environments

Since some years, a stronger orientation towards the social environment in relation to inclusive education can be detected, as summarised in Westling Allodi (2017). She emphasises the varying significance of goals, attitudes, and values in schools, expressed in variables such as responsibility, participation, and helpfulness. In particular, this approach can be used as an instrument to evaluate and further develop the school learning environment.

The aforementioned uncertainty and abuse of the term *inclusion*, illustrated in expressions such as the *included child*, has promoted the emergence of the phrase *inclusive learning environment* (*inkluderande lärmiljö*). This development first became visible in 2015, when a research and development programme changed its designation from "inclusion" to "inclusive learning environment" (Ifous, 2015, p. 10). In recent years, this reframing has become more frequent in the Swedish debate (e.g., SKL, 2017; Skolverket, 2016). The linguistic change is more than a semantic issue; rather, it promotes a shift from an individual-based to a socially determined approach,

reflecting a relational perspective on school problems. Upon applying this view to students with impairments of any kind, the increasing significance of the social model of disability becomes apparent.

Current situation and tendencies in education practice

Changes in the education system are observable at the levels of not only policy and politics but also practice. In this section, we summarise some of the most apparent developments regarding inclusive education. Overall, there are ambivalent tendencies that both strengthen and weaken inclusive education.

The categorisation of special education needs

One particularity of the Swedish school system is the non-categorical definition of SEN. The Education Act (SFS 2010:800) defines SEN in relation to the risk of the student missing the minimal learning objectives. Other non-specified "difficulties" in school can lead to SEN. In practice, however, individual students' shortcomings and a categorical perspective of school problems prevail (Barow & Östlund, 2018; Isaksson, Lindqvist, & Bergström, 2010).

Since 2012/2013, the Swedish National Agency for Education has published data on the frequency of SEN. Due to a reform of the definition of SEN in 2014, the number of students with SEN decreased sharply from around 13% to about 5% to 6% today (5.3% in 2018/2019). The reason for this development was the implementation of "extra adaptations"—a hybrid of general and special education—stipulating support measures without the need to establish a specific action programme. The principal is responsible for decision-making concerning assessment and support measures. The distinction between SEN and extra adaptations is based on the extent and duration of the support but leaves room for interpretation and sometimes disconcertion by the practitioners. To date, no in-depth research has been conducted on the outcome of this reorganisation. As measured by the number of students who miss the learning objectives at the end of grade 9, hardly any progress is discernible: in the 2018/2019 school year, more than 15% of school leavers were not eligible for an upper secondary school national programme (Skolverket, 2020). This ratio is higher than for the share of students with SEN.

Consequently, the definition of SEN in relation to the risk of missing the learning objectives leads to rather late support, as illustrated in Figure 1. An increase in SEN categorisations until school year 6 is typical. Thereafter, the change from primary to lower secondary education results in a decrease intermediately, which is followed by an even more noticeable rise after year 7. Overall, it is twice as likely for boys to receive a SEN categorisation as it is for girls. It remains to be seen how the recently introduced support "guarantee" (Prop. 2017/18:195) in Swedish and mathematics will affect the SEN and goal attainment ratios.

Types of special education support

SEN categorisation can lead to different support measures, as illustrated in Figure 2. In all categories, boys are overrepresented most clearly in individual teaching and special groups. Individual teaching follows the general SEN pattern, with an increase over the years, interrupted by the transition from primary to lower secondary education. In total, 1.1% of the students attend special groups, which has remained a rather steady percentage over time. Due to current education policy, more special groups may arise in the years to come. Varying solutions seem likely, depending on the conviction of stakeholders such as local education politicians and principals. The dilemma is that the opportunity to adapt the curricula to students' respective learning conditions lowers the chances for a smooth transition to a national programme in upper secondary school. The most common support measure, instructional guidance in the native language, can be a part of SEN support measures, but it can also be given as part of extra adaptations or ordinary teaching.

In international debates on inclusive education, stigmatising effects are a recurring argument against separating educational settings (e.g., Kauffman & Badar, 2013). This also becomes apparent in Swedish research (Hjörne & Säljö, 2019; Karlsson, 2007) describing marginalisation, limited participation, and low agency for students in special classes. The Swedish National Agency for Education highlights the municipalities' ambition to implement inclusive approaches but is critical regarding the lack of adaptations in regular schools, provided that special groups exist (Skolverket, 2014). The varying arrangements of local education policy becomes apparent in a study analysing the schooling of students with emotional behavioural difficulties. Over a decade, schools with similar socioeconomic conditions developed different patterns with regard to their handling of existing educational challenges: inclusive approaches or the transfer of students into special groups (Malmqvist, 2018a). Other research emphasises the perspectives of teachers in regular schools, who see themselves as being over-strained, left alone, and consequently frustrated (Gidlund, 2018). The need to vary teaching strategies in an inclusive classroom is emphasised by Nilholm and Alm (2010), whose research gives particular insight into students' perspectives and the complexity of inclusive approaches.

Special schools for students with disabilities

Irrespective of the inclusive intentions of the Education Act, different types of special schools exist to accommodate students with disabilities. Few students attend state-run special schools for children who are blind, deaf, deaf–blind, or have severe speech impairments (*specialskolor*). Although the number of students has slightly increased in recent years, the total – 659 students in 2018/2019 (Skolverket, 2019b) – remains rather low.

The vast majority of students with intellectual disability attend municipal special schools (*särskola*), although their attendance is often organised in cooperation with the regular schools. These special schools are divided into two branches, accommodating students according to the severity of their disability, which are mirrored in different curricula. The number of students enrolled in these schools varies over time. After an increase to 1.4% around the year 2000, the

share of these students decreased again before becoming steady. For the last five years, approximately 1% of all children have been attending schools for students with intellectual disability (Skolverket, 2019c). Rosenqvist (2007) found no overrepresentation of students with immigrant backgrounds, but did find, among the practicing professionals, an uncertainty in differentiating intellectual disability from language deficiencies.

The Education Act accommodates students with intellectual disability at primary schools ("integrated students"; SFS 2010:800), who are defined as receiving at least half of their teaching in regular classes. At the national level and with large local deviations, about 12% of students with intellectual disability who are registered in special schools are "integrated" into primary schools. However, this percentage is not an indication of teaching quality in terms of participation, self-image, learning outcomes, and so on. Tideman et al. (2004) sees advantages with inclusive approaches, provided that "the school is successful in encountering the needs of the individual student" (p. 231). In a recent study, Klang et al. (2019) found similarities in the forms of teaching in mainstream and special educational settings. Nonetheless, expectations of pupils' performances are comparatively higher in mainstream schools, but social participation appears to be more important in special schools. In Sweden, however, there is a dearth of research on this particular vulnerable group of students.

The significance of neuropsychiatric diagnoses

In contrast to the diminished number of students with SEN, varying frequency data circulate for neuropsychiatric diagnoses, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The Board of Health and Welfare is referring to the Swedish patient registry, which states that 3.3% of young people aged 10–17 years were treated for ADHD in 2017. The equivalent for younger children (six to nine years) was 1.0% (Socialstyrelsen, 2019a, p. 26). Regarding ASD, the share of young people was 1.0% for the age group 10–17 years and 0.5% for children aged six to nine years (ibid., p. 27).

Figures for Stockholm County indicate a higher prevalence for neuropsychiatric diagnoses. For the examined years – 2011–2016 – a sharp increase in the number of diagnoses became visible (Centrum för epidemiologi och samhällsmedicin, 2017). Within the six-year period, for the 13-17 year age group, there were 7.7% with an ADHD diagnosis and 3.1% with an ASD diagnosis. For younger children (0–12 years), the percentages were 2.0% for ADHD and 1.4% for ASD. In both age groups, boys were diagnosed more often than girls. The study discusses, inter alia, the increasing performance requirements of schools, leading to a growing "demand" (ibid.) for diagnoses to legitimate special support. This argument is in line with research on the varying levels of prescription of ADHD medication in some regions of Sweden, where "ADHD diagnosis has been a requirement for getting special support" (Socialstyrelsen, 2019b, p. 24).

In this context, it is important to refer to the stipulation in the Education Act that SEN assessment is independent of medical diagnoses. However, education researchers (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011; Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011; Malmqvist, 2018b) and the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2016) demonstrate that diagnoses in a considerable

number of cases play an important role in SEN categorisation and resource allocation. In a number of municipalities, self-contained ADHD classes were established (Malmqvist & Nilholm, 2016). There is an obvious gap between the intentions of the legislation and the practice in schools, reflecting a wider medicalisation of the society. Hjörne (2018) has seen a resurgence of psychological–medical discourse based on neuropsychiatric diagnosis. The non-categorical Swedish SEN approach is prone to letting medical labels gain influence—at least through the back door. Regarding the consequences of labelling, Heimdahl Mattson (2008) argues that it is not the diagnosis itself but the special support in separated groups that leads to stigmatisation.

Students with immigrant backgrounds

Sweden has a long tradition of migration, with various peaks over time. In the 1960s, labour migration from Finland and southern Europe was prevalent, and in the 1990s, numerous refugees came from the former Yugoslavia. In 2015, approximately 180,000 people from conflict-affected countries, such as Syria, arrived in Sweden – more than in any other European country when viewed in relation to the number of inhabitants. Although the number of refugees decreased in the ensuing years, the large influx of immigrants means major challenges for policymakers in terms of social integration in general and educational inclusion in particular. In the 2018/2019 school year, 7.8% of all students in the compulsory school had either recently arrived, lived in Sweden four years or less, or had an unknown background (Skolverket, 2019d). The variation between and even within the municipalities is also high in this regard.

Newly arrived students can attend introductory classes with the aim of developing their language skills and then change to mainstream classes. Moreover, students with immigrant backgrounds have the right to mother-tongue education. From the lower secondary level, newly arrived students can receive supervision in their native language.

However, the difficulties encountered by students with immigrant backgrounds – especially first-generation immigrants – are challenging. According to data from PISA 2015, the "performance gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students in science is larger than the average across OECD countries" (OECD, 2016, p. 1). Overall, the OECD data indicate growing inequalities with respect to learning outcomes. The report states that there are increasing gaps between the students with the highest and lowest performances, as well as between the students from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged homes (ibid.). This is in line with Swedish reports emphasising the increasing influence of socioeconomic background factors on education results (Skolverket, 2018b). From a wider perspective, these challenges are connected to the marginalisation of immigrants in terms of, for example, the ghettoisation of suburban areas and hampered access to the labour market (Beach & Sernhede, 2011). The complex relationships between migration, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and so on and their connection to special education policies and educational achievement merit further studies.

An example of inclusive school development: The Essunga case

A decade ago, substantial changes in the school organisation of Essunga, a small rural municipality in western Sweden, attracted attention among educational scientists and policymakers. In the national rankings based on the learning outcomes at the end of compulsory school, one school in the municipality found itself lag behind other schools across the nation. Aware of its low ranking, the school embarked on an unprecedented reform process that was characterised by a new thought style that favoured inclusion (Persson, 2013). The school closed down special groups, and students and staff moved from such groups into regular classes. Moreover, the teachers worked collaboratively within study circles, discussing research literature and focusing on the capabilities of all children. Other measures addressed, inter alia, structure and clarity in teaching, and clear expectations towards students and their parents, as well as homework assistance, were outlined. However, a flexible interpretation of inclusion existed. Teachers were also granted the flexibility to teach part-time outside the regular classroom. The results of the changes were astonishing: Only four years later, the school was ranked near the top. From a student perspective, success orientation, cooperation, trust, and confidence contributed to this achievement (Allan & Persson, 2016, 2018). The case of Essunga illustrates that inclusive education can be harmonised with high performance in terms of learning outcomes. This is even more relevant with regard to economic resources, as the implementation of this inclusive approach required no additional funding.

A synopsis: Sweden in the 2020s

Today, inclusive education in Sweden is a topic that is full of tension, contradictions, and dilemmas at various levels. This relates to not only policy and politics but also theory and practice. There is broad agreement that full participation in society is desirable; however, dissent prevails regarding the attainment of this goal. In the future, the Swedish education system will develop further not least in the context of societal challenges, which are hardly predictable.

At the policy level, the developments of the last three decades hardly promoted educational inclusiveness. In particular, it is apparent that the marketisation of schools, in combination with factors such as residential segregation, has contributed to the widening of the social gap. Under these circumstances, social justice in terms of the equality of outcomes (Kerr & Rafflo, 2016) is difficult to achieve, and the necessary equitable processes conflict with the concepts of marketisation and free choice.

Simultaneously, the downgrading of Swedish students in large-scale international comparative studies calls attention to the enhancement of knowledge production but seldom to inclusion. The current situation in regard to education policy is ambivalent; it is characterised by an awareness by the concerned that efforts need to be made to support students in difficult learning situations. However, this tends to be done via questionable means, such as more resource schools. Little evidence exists that such establishments will contribute to improved learning outcomes.

Swedish national policy documents, such as the Education Act and the curricula, do not contain the term *inclusion*, although they endeavour to adopt an inclusive approach. The terminological confusion concerning *inclusive education* hampers not only the dialogue between researchers and practitioners but also the communicability of inclusion for a wider audience, such as politicians and the general public. To avoid abuse of the expression *inclusive education*, a more in-depth terminological discussion is necessary. By focusing on the interaction between students and their social surroundings, the terminological development of "inclusive learning environments" can be fruitful.

Regarding the implementation of inclusive education, obvious gaps between policy and practice exist (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011). The reduction in the number of students with SEN due to the 2014 reform can be interpreted in different ways – that is, as decategorisation by avoiding stigmatising side effects but also as deprofessionalisation by depriving an action programme of systematic help and thereby jeopardising equity. Regardless, the high percentage of young people missing the learning objectives at the end of compulsory school – more than 15% – is no success story. In the context of SEN assessment, the non-categorical Swedish SEN approach is thwarted by the growing importance of neuropsychiatric diagnoses. Regarding the situation of students with immigrant backgrounds, especially those in the suburban areas of the major cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, additional measures are needed to secure social justice for this vulnerable group of young people. Otherwise, the existing marginalisation will increase, leading to intense social upheaval.

To date, approximately 2% to 3% of students with SEN are permanently enrolled in special classes or schools. The share of students in segregated settings increases between Grades 1 and 9, and boys are clearly overrepresented. For the last five years, this structure has been rather stable. In the future, it will be crucial if the political ambition to strengthen resource schools and special schools for students with intellectual disabilities can be realised in the municipalities. In contrast, the development of more inclusive schools is possible, as the example of the Essunga municipality underlines.

In recent decades, the Swedish education system, with its tradition of social justice, equality, and universalism, has come under pressure. Education for all is a self-evident right, but this cannot be equated with inclusive education. Fostering inclusive learning environments that acknowledge, celebrate, and further develop the strengths of *all* learners will require enormous effort.

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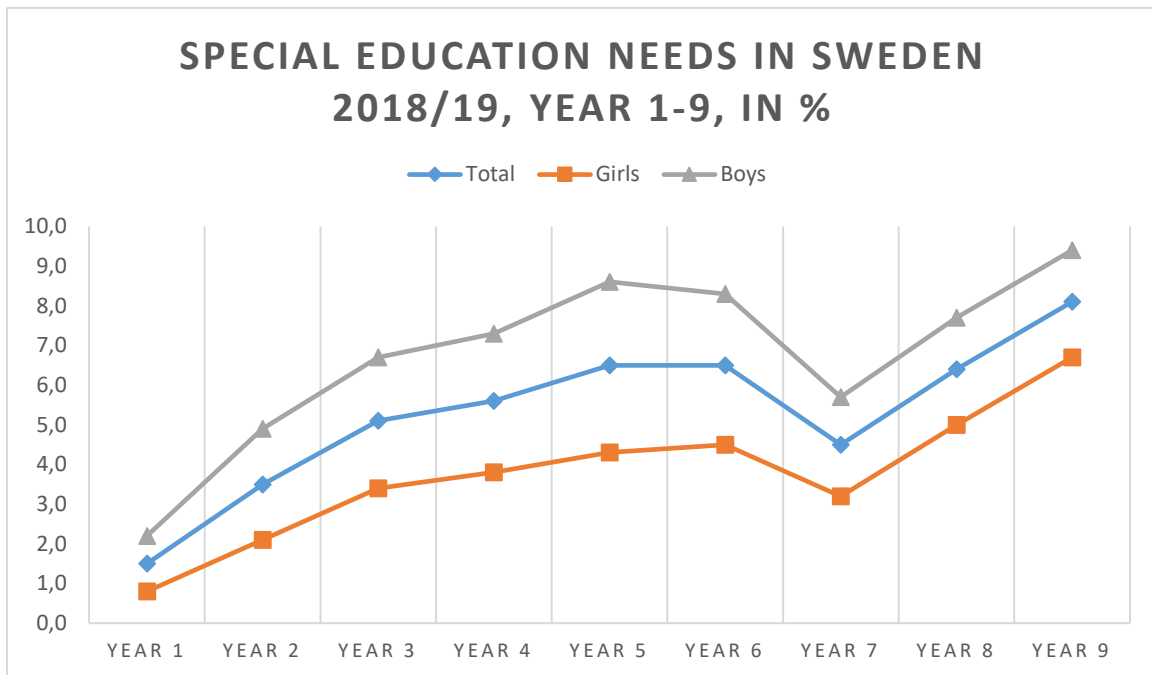
FIGURE 3.1 Special education needs in Sweden 2018/19, year 1-9, in % (Source: Skolverket, 2019a)
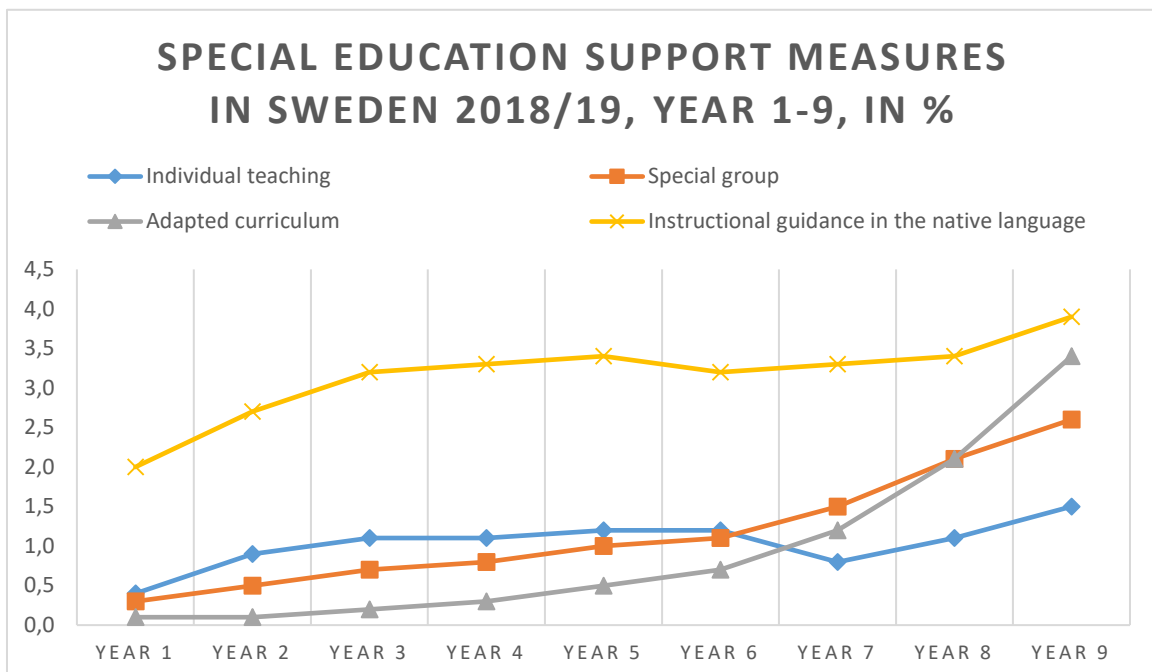

FIGURE 3.2 Special education support measures in Sweden 2018/19, year 1-9, in % (Source: Skolverket, 2019a)