

Questions for first Leverhulme meeting 19th/20th April 2012, Edinburgh

Special Education and Policy Change: A Study of Six Jurisdictions

Background information required for the first meeting

- Description of Sweden as a jurisdiction (total population, school population, urban/rural spread, GDP, industries etc)

Sweden has slightly more than 9 million inhabitants. About 1,5 million children go to school. Sweden exhibits one of the fastest urbanization processes in Western Europe. However, still a large portion of the population live in smaller municipalities.

- Structure of the general education system in our jurisdiction

The school system is divided into the preschool, the comprehensive school (grundskolan) and the upper secondary school (gymnasiet). The last year in preschool and the comprehensive school are mandatory, i.e. 10 years of education is mandatory. However, most children spend 18 years in the educational system, i.e. including preschool.

- Structure of SEN/ASN system and how this relates to the structure of the general education system (proportion of school population in special settings, categories of learning difficulty/disability/social difficulty which are recognised).

The Swedish school system can be described as a dual integrated system, i.e. there is a clearly definable special educational system which to a large extent is in close connection with the general education system. The most segregated educational arrangements are the special programs for children with learning disabilities (about 1,4 % of the school population), special school (with few pupils) and special teaching classes in local schools (most often for children with neuropsychiatric diagnoses or in socioemotional difficulties). There are no official statistics about how many pupils are placed in such special groups. However, we know that these segregating practices are increasing.

- Broad principles underpinning the mainstream and special education systems and changes over the past decade.

Sweden has been known for its political device “one school for all” and as a system displaying high levels of excellence and equity. However, both the excellence and the equity of the system have been challenged in latter years. In the beginning of the 1990ies the system was to a certain part decentralized moving power from the state to the municipalities. Goals were set nationally, however, the accomplishment of the goals was a concern for municipalities and teachers. In latter years neo-liberal political strategies built upon accountability and choice has emerged. At the same time, the state has regained power over the school system.

- Major challenges for the special and mainstream systems at the present time.

There are of course different opinions concerning what the major challenges are. Of course, lowering levels of excellence and equity are major challenges. However, there are also the

additional challenges of the narrowing down of the goal structure of the educational system since knowledge goals are put to the forefront. Thus, other goals such as critical thinking, joy of learning, establishment of learning communities, preparing for citizenship and so on are less focused. The steering documents acknowledge these wider concerns. However, the political debate (and some research) is mostly concerned with the knowledge goals only. Challenges for the special needs system is to account for an inclusive education. An education which is able to handle diversity and support pupils to reach the goals of schooling.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the Swedish educational system concerns the necessity to improve the teaching profession in order to be able to meet the whole population with different skills and needs. There are several threats to the teaching profession: 1) status has been lowered which makes it harder to recruit students. Lowering of status has to do with a) demonization of the education system in media, b) comparatively low salaries 2) the quality paradox which implies that teachers is extremely focused on assessment and ranking of schools which implies less time for activities that are fundamental to achieve quality such as planning of lessons and teaching children. 3) too little resources are given to research and teacher education.

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