The broad aims of this paper are to discuss how 'special needs' are constructed and constituted as a particular type of problem in the school context. Even though education of ‘abnormal’ children has a long history, the demand for special education in Swedish schools first arose in the 1920–30s as a side issue to general education in schools. Not surprisingly, it occurred at the same time as what were being seen as reliable and objective methods of measurement of intelligence were being developed. Even though educational research was in its infancy in those days, placement in schools especially designed to meet the needs of pupils belonging to the same category of disability was seen as the best solution also from the point of view of research. Consequently, special schools were established throughout the country, but they were clustered in urban regions and many children had to live separated from their families for months and sometimes even years.

Elementary school systems were established in the Nordic countries during the 1950s and 1960s, slowly replacing the former dualistic school systems. This involved integrating special school pupils into the new schools. However, grounded in a value system celebrating 'education for all' as part of the emerging welfare state, the process provoked opposition, especially from secondary school teachers, who were used to strongly differentiated groups of pupils in their classes. In the late 1950s, around 30 per cent of each age group attended junior secondary school, with only one-third continuing on to high school. Interestingly, the number of pupils dropping out from these schools was remarkably high despite their restrictive admission regulations and positively selected classes. Marklund (1984) wrote that around 25 per cent of the pupils were excluded due to poor results in their studies.

An interesting phenomenon in the wake of the elementary school reforms was the emergence of special needs education as a kind of 'within-school-differentiation'. Teachers experienced insuperable difficulties teaching heterogeneous groups of pupils, which called for a kind of twin-track...
education for troublesome pupils. In Sweden a system of different kinds of special classes emerged within the elementary school system. Pupils with reading and writing difficulties received their instruction in remedial reading classes; the so-called maladjusted pupils went to observation classes; and ‘retarded’ pupils went to remedial classes especially designed to meet their special needs.

Reviewing this period in retrospect often evokes a picture of exclusion, segregation and even stigmatisation, but was such a view justified? In an attempt to shed light on this issue, it is necessary to critically analyse how and why ‘special needs’ are being constructed in the Swedish comprehensive school, thereby taking into consideration (special) education as part of the vision of a new society and building of the modern welfare state.

EDUCATION AS NATIONAL INTEREST

The social role of special needs education has been connected with the development of the elementary school from the late 19th century and onwards. The problems addressed by special needs education are thus modern problems, and the needs identified are modern needs. Still, to talk about special needs without taking historical change into consideration, would be to offer only very limited insight into the problems that special needs education was intended to address. Today, children’s needs are given high priority on the social and educational agenda, but they are often considered as if they exist independently of a social, cultural and historical context. This may be seen as a manifestation of norms and values constructed to rationalise and legitimate the world as it is. This transference of norms over generations is too often overlooked when explaining ‘what schools are for’. The transfer of knowledge and social upbringing are considered to be the most important tasks for the compulsory school, while school as an effective instrument for dealing with societal change, such as urbanisation, migration, proletarisation and democratisation, is virtually ignored. Briefly, the role of education in modern society is seen by many as that of legitimating the prevailing social order and of allocating individuals in allusion to a future position on the labour market. The focus upon and interest in school children is therefore logical, as their scope of action is limited by the simple fact that school is compulsory.

The concept of special needs

The notion of ‘special needs’ is intimately linked to the rise of the worldwide ‘Education for All’ movement, in Sweden named ‘En skola för alla’. Paradoxically, in the footsteps of the postwar introduction of Education for All in Sweden, the number of pupils labelled as having ‘special needs’ increased dramatically. Many teachers experienced difficulties in dealing with pupil diversity in the classroom and in meeting everyone’s individual needs. This has often been regarded as the failure of schools to meet the diverse needs of pupils, manifesting itself in resignation and distress among teachers and pupils not achieving set targets.

If collectivism and solidarity towards vulnerable groups of people in society were hall-
marks of the postwar period, this era seems to have come to an end around 1990. Education as a vehicle for advancing social justice had given way to ideals based upon personal choice and competition and its role was more or less that of a commodity to be traded in the market place. The language was that of the market (e.g. price labels on pupils, effectiveness, target fulfilment) or that of neo-liberalism (e.g. self-fulfilment, accountability, self-determination, empowerment), rather than of the social inclusion of difference and diversity. The 'Education for All' movement was transformed into a structure of market in the 1990s and the rhetoric of inclusion became a metaphor for the dominance of human capital, manifested in personal choice, over social justice. Citizenship was replaced by human rights stressing the individualisation of rights and promotion of dominant social interests.

In the footsteps of this new discourse, where individualism and personal choice were celebrated, children's behaviour and deviances from the norms set, became even more targeted. As almost all children spend at least 12 years in school along with other children, it would be almost impossible for them not to become exposed to the 'professional eye'. Thus school has become the most important arena in society for detection, diagnosing and treatment of all kinds of abnormalities.

THEORIZING SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

In their analysis of special educational research in the mid-1990s an international committee of researchers levelled intense criticism at special educational research in Sweden (Rosengren & Öhngren, 1997). The most serious shortcomings, according to the report, was a lack of interest in theory-generating within the field and analyses of the impact of the radical changes within the Swedish educational system during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The reductionist and decontextualised understanding of special needs and special needs education has been a characteristic feature of special educational research in Sweden and elsewhere during past decades (see, e.g., Emanuelsson, Persson & Rosenqvist, 2001; Thomas & Loxley, 2001). Needs are individually bound and located within the child and respond to schools’ demand for order, calm, routine and control. This position is based on taken-for-granted assumptions of support to meet these needs often organised as special education, separated from ordinary classroom activities.

However, theorising special needs education has by tradition been a low-prioritized field, not only in Sweden but also internationally. Gary Thomas and Andrew Loxley write that:

“If education as a field of study has always suffered from something of an inferiority complex about its academic status – borrowing its epistemological tenets and research methods only too readily from its clever cousins psychology and sociology – special education has suffered the inferiority complex even more profoundly.” (Thomas & Loxley, 2001)
By tradition, the epistemological roots of special needs education are to be found in medicine and psychology. In the 1980s this psycho-medical perspective found itself challenged by a socio-political one founded on a social model of disability rather than a pathological model. Skidmore (1998) claims that both models are reductionist in nature and therefore inadequate as analytical tools for understanding the complex field of special needs education.

A contribution to an alternative approach in the Swedish context to special needs and the relationship between pupils’ needs and schools’ needs was the SPEKO project (Special needs education and its consequences) funded by the Swedish Agency for Education and reported by Persson in 1998. This research, which was based on interviews with 80 professionals in schools and quantitative data comprising 8800 pupils, showed among other things that pupils’ gender and socio-economic home conditions were positively correlated with special needs education. Boys from working class families were strongly overrepresented, which was explained by the interviewees with these boys’ maladjustment at school. Obviously, special education in these cases was more a response to the need of schools to control disruptive pupils than to overcome pupils’ difficulties. Schools’ approach to pupil diversity was that of assimilation (making the child as ‘normal’ as possible by compensation) rather than acceptance (celebrating the normal variation of differences). Research within this field has also been carried out at the University of Sheffield, England, in particular by Derrick Armstrong and Len Barton (Galloway, Armstrong & Tomlinson, 1994; Armstrong, 1995, Barton, 1997).

Identification of needs and measurement of capacities
Twenty-one per cent of Swedish compulsory school pupils are judged to be in need of special needs education according to Persson (2002). However, one in five of these pupils, despite being defined as special needs pupils, do not receive such support. The research also indicated that the dividing line between those pupils defined as in need of special support and the others was drawn rather arbitrarily, and that the special needs label was a response not only to the needs of certain individuals but also to the needs of schools for order and control. This interesting twofold function of special needs education has been pointed out in earlier research (Emanuelsson, 1983, Skrtic, 1991, Haug, 1998).

At the same time, the number of pupils enrolled in special schools for the intellectually disabled (särskolan) has increased from 0.9 per cent to 1.4 percent during the past five to six years (Skolverket, 2002). This means that around 200,000 pupils in Sweden receive some kind of special educational support during the school year. Besides, Swedish society has become multiethnic and multilingual, and increasingly so as time goes on. Reports indicate that the number of children and youth living in poverty has substantially increased over the past few years, and there is a significant increase in the number of homes where children speak a primary language other than Swedish. Students are at greater risk of needing special needs education services if they are poor or/and belong to a minority group.
Children have long been subjected to adults' need for surveillance, discipline and control. However, during the first three decades in the history of the compulsory school in Sweden, the predominant ideology was one of avoiding ranking, categorizing and failing pupils. The discourse manifested in national curricula and syllabi was celebrating values such as solidarity, collective knowledge, non-competition and respect for individual differences. It should be acknowledged, however, that even if this was the dominant discourse, practice in schools often proved to rest upon other values.

Parliamentary decisions were arrived at in a spirit of consensus and it was not until 1985 that members of parliament disagreed about an important educational issue – the liberal and conservative parties were reticent about the implementation of a new national teacher training programme.

During the 1980s pupils with special educational needs were given special attention and an ambition, as far as possible, was to avoid separation and special treatment away from the class guided official policy. A significant example was a green paper presented by an expert committee set up by the government in which a new and extended special education teacher training programme was proposed (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1986). The leading feature of this document was the approach to ‘special needs’, which was seen more or less socially constructed and strongly related to the learning environment.

This ‘inclusive’ ideology no doubt still has a strong foothold, but the present situation is clear-cut when it comes to educational ideology. The goal- and result-oriented steering system introduced in the early 1990s clearly reflects the ambiguity and obscurity that characterize the understanding of pupils who experience different kinds of difficulties at school. According to the school ordinance, children who for some reason are judged as unlikely to reach set targets by a fixed time will receive special support. These so-called ‘attainment targets’ define the limits of what is deemed acceptable knowledge. In the green paper preceding the implementation of the new grading system (SOU 1992:86), the basic arguments for a ‘pass level’ were described as the level necessary to ‘be able to understand, function, and work in our society and orient oneself in the world around us’. Thus, it was not primarily in relation to school subjects that the pupil was to be judged in terms of pass or fail. The mark was also to be understood as a kind of authorization of citizenship. The committee was even aware of the fact that for some pupils the pass limit would be unattainable: ‘However, for some pupils the targets, despite extensive support and hard individual work, will be impossible to attain owing to handicaps of different kinds.’ It is difficult to refrain from apprehending this assertion as cynical, since there will be some pupils in every year cohort whose prospects of getting a ‘pass’ in all school subjects are limited. Almost one in four 9th grader thus fails in one or more school subjects every year.

The attainment targets are static by nature and rest upon the idea that it is possible to describe, summarize and value the degree to which each individual fulfils targets set beforehand. The system was constructed on the false notion that every pupil has equal starting-points or preconditions and that it is possible to use this notion as a basis for measuring a pupil’s improvement or development. As children learn differently and at a
different pace, the system does not take individual differences into account. Moreover, it is almost impossible to formulate stable measures of what might be parameters representing a pupil’s ability to understand, function and work in a society the development of which is highly uncertain to predict.

The political ambiguity, unobtrusiveness and obscurity are flagrant in this matter. Two expert commissions set up by the government in 2000/2001 have arrived at similar conclusions; namely that the present target system is unclear and that for pupils with special needs, attainment targets in reality become the only targets. Perspective targets are seen more or less as ‘extra study’ which is difficult to get through. In consequence, less able pupils risk acquiring a limited and often decontextualised picture of the world presented to them at school.

The paradox in relation to the situation described above is that a great number of pupils failing to obtain ‘pass’ in a school that is compulsory for them to go to tend to be turned into a special education problem. Thus tens of thousands of 9th graders receive special support in the school core subjects in order to qualify for a national programme in high school. It is little wonder that both these pupils and their special educators wring their hands in despondency when success does not manifest itself. Not even the best qualified special educator can remedy failures caused by the system itself.

CONCLUSION

In Sweden (as in other countries, too) it is difficult to find a uniform and consequent political agenda as far as ‘special needs’ are concerned. It is easy to find examples of contrasting expressions of power, control and care concerning children. The Child Ombudsman’s work and responsibilities and the consolidation of pupils’ rights in the proposed new school act are merely examples of society’s ambition to shield and protect vulnerable children. This ambition, however, is counteracted by school itself, with a target system that throws a spanner into the works for the same children as their learning potentials might be depreciated and marked as ‘fail’. Instead, quoting Professor Emeritus Ingemar Emanuelsson, it should be normal to obtain ‘pass’, because everyone is good enough for continuous learning and development at his or her own pace.

School, thus, consolidates the ideology of meritocracy, thereby at worst contributing to separating, excluding and ultimately losing individuals whose capacities in that way are at risk of remaining unrevealed.
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