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Research Paper

Special needs education and inclusion in Germany and Sweden

Enseignement spécialisé et école inclusive en Allemagne et en Suède

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes both the Swedish and the German school systems, focusing on the implementation of inclusive education. The structure of the two systems, the way the categorization processes work, the financing of inclusion as well as teaching models for the realization of inclusion within the classroom are explored. The analysis is built on steering documents and research articles. Although a systematic comparison is not possible, the analysis reveals a different understanding of how to support children with learning difficulties due to the traditions of the two school systems. The different ways of implementing inclusive education are linked to the categorization processes and financing models. In both countries, inclusive education requires cooperation between different professions. However, separation of children with special educational needs in form of special schools or special classes is still part of the reality in both countries. The findings of the analysis are discussed in this paper.

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L'article analyse les systèmes scolaires suédois et allemands en se focalisant sur l'application de l'éducation inclusive. La recherche a été menée sur la structure des deux systèmes scolaires, les processus de catégorisation et de diagnostic, le financement de soutiens pédagogiques spécialisés et de modèles d'enseignement menant à l'inclusion dans la salle de classe. L'analyse se base sur des règlements administratifs et des rapports scientifiques. Bien qu'il soit difficile de comparer les deux pays, cette analyse montre que la façon d'aider les élèves avec des difficultés d'apprentissage est assez différente, ce qui renvoie à des traditions différentes dans les deux systèmes scolaires. La façon d'appliquer l'éducation inclusive est très variable et est fortement liée au processus de catégorisation et aux modèles financiers. Dans les deux pays, l'éducation inclusive requiert de la coopération entre des professions différentes. Cependant, la séparation des enfants ayant des besoins pédagogiques spéciaux dans des écoles spécialisées ou des classes spécialisées est encore une réalité aussi bien en Allemagne qu'en Suède. Les résultats de l'analyse seront discutés.

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1. Introduction

In the last three decades the concept of inclusion, and more particularly, inclusive education, has gained ground in many countries. Inclusion is mainly described as a process of reconstruction and change to foster participation (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). It is conceptualized as being part of the notion of diversity, and diversity itself is seen as a facilitating factor for collaboration between different groups (Nilholm & Göransson, 2013). As such, inclusive education entails processes that enhance students' sense of community and participation (Nilholm, 2006). Yet, there is variation in relation to which the groups in need of inclusion are being recognized (European Union, NESSE report, 2012). In a broader sense, inclusion as a concept is theorized to view different kinds of diversity positively (e.g. race, gender, poverty). However, students with special educational needs (SEN) often seem to be the focus of discussions on inclusive education.

As Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) put it, inclusive education refers to a vision that prioritizes teaching a diverse group of students in one classroom and promoting social collaboration. According to them, schools should be organized accordingly to provide a social community that meets the needs of all its students. In line with the scientific debate on inclusive education, one can argue that there are different views about inclusion and ways of implementing it. In some countries, such as Italy, progress towards inclusive education has led to the closure of most special needs schools, while in other countries a two-tiered school system has either been developed, or continues to exist. Therefore, there is still wide variation in school systems across European states when it comes to education enrollment of children that are identified as having special educational needs into mainstream vs. special need schools (European Union, NESSE report, 2012).

This article analyzes the situation of children with SEN in Germany and Sweden, focusing on inclusive education. Both countries are adduced as contrasting cases of inclusive education within Europe. A report of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) in 2010 (NESSE report) stated that Sweden is one of the countries with a smaller number of students in segregated special needs classes, while, in comparison, the report identified that Germany has a high number of students in special needs schools (European Union, NESSE report, 2012) (Fig. 1).

However, the NESSE report of the European Union, NESSE report, 2012: 20 calls for a degree of caution when interpreting the data: "Whilst some special schools have shut down, the number of

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