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## Confronting the idealised ‘Nordic model’ in education with contemporary realities of special education in Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

For decades, the Nordic countries have been admired for their inclusive education systems within egalitarian societies, bolstered by PISA studies and global calls to ensure inclusive education as a human right. This paper contrasts idealised perspectives on Nordic education with internal experiences, exploring recent challenges to the relationship between special and inclusive education. Using Sweden as a case study, it highlights internal diversity within the Nordic region, showing differing paths and gaps between research, policy and school realities. The risks of idealising past educational models are discussed, noting that Sweden, once known for its egalitarian education and low special education needs classification rates, now faces higher classification rates and more separate provision due to policy changes. Recent trends have shown a shift towards increased diagnosis and classification, influenced by marketisation and decentralisation policies. The paper focuses on neurodivergence, analysing shifts in government priorities, teacher education, school practices and research agendas. Analysis of recent policies, reports and educational data reveals winners and losers in school participation, providing insights into the implications for educational discourse, the future of the ‘Nordic model’, and Swedish education in a global context.

### KEYWORDS

Inclusive education; Nordic model; educational policy; Sweden; neurodivergence

### Comparative perspectives on inclusive education in the Nordic countries

The ‘Nordic model’ of education is recognised for balancing inclusivity and high academic standards within a social-democratic welfare state that supports equity in education, equal opportunities and inclusion (see Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Frønes et al. 2020). Central to this model are well-prepared teachers who receive continuous professional development, ensuring they can support diverse learners effectively. This, combined with strong community engagement, allows the system to maintain both academic excellence and inclusivity. While the ‘Nordic metaspace’ composed of five societies with historical interconnections – political, economic and linguistic – have fostered similar educational values and policies, their cultures are not identical (Krejsler 2023). Furthermore, educational policy and system development do not remain static, instead

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gradual adaptations reflect political, economic and socio-demographic changes meant to address such challenges as social segregation and integration of immigrants and minority pupils (Bunar 2017). While ‘one school for all’ is a common value of Nordic education systems, achieving equity and inclusion remains, as elsewhere, a demanding process and an incompletely realised goal in these five countries (e.g. Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Frønes et al. 2020; Keles, ten Braak, and Munthe 2022). Given the current conditions, not least due to political dynamics, historical-comparative perspectives and contemporary national case studies are essential to assess and understand change and the state of inclusive education.

Here, we contrast traditional perspectives on the Nordic approach to inclusive and special (needs) education with contemporary developments within the Nordic region (Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2016). Clarifying terms that are closely related but not entirely synonymous: Inclusive education focuses on *all* students, regardless of their abilities or needs, learning together in classrooms and receiving appropriate supports there (Florian 2019). Special education refers generally to the provision of specialised instruction in a variety of settings, usually provided on the basis of categories of special educational needs (SEN), which do not exist in the Swedish context. Thus, we refrain from using the concept ‘special needs education’ that specifically addresses the needs of students with disabilities or learning challenges, often within specialised settings. In a recent study, Honkasilta, Pihlaja, and Pesonen (2024) examined Finland’s commitment to inclusive education, highlighting successful provision of free, accessible education to all students, regardless of background, but also significant challenges, such as the discrimination and exclusion faced by students with disabilities, indicating that achieving inclusive education requires efforts to align policies, culture and practices (see also Jahnukainen et al. 2023). In Sweden, Paulsrud’s analysis of Swedish policy documents (1980–2011) reconstructs crucial changes in the Swedish educational system that have affected inclusive education, revealing the implications of political shifts to the right since the 1990s in Sweden. If that analysis indicates that Sweden was already diverging and no longer as well-aligned with the above-mentioned principles of the Nordic model as generally believed, we bring this critique forward to today. We study the most recent policies and implementation of special education focusing on neurodivergence, a controversial and rapidly growing informal category of special educational need. Such a line of enquiry raises persistent issues in educational research, including temporality, such as the stickiness of established views and time lag in revising outdated beliefs; the risks of homogenising regional models; and undifferentiated analysis of special education, ignoring or blurring differences between categories applied in schooling.

Policies across Europe promote diversity, equity and inclusion, stressing the need for transdisciplinary collaboration to advance knowledge and practice (e.g. Ainscow 2020). This ensures that all students receive equal support and opportunities. Promoting cooperation among scholars, policymakers and practitioners from different educational traditions is essential. A key player here is the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), an organisation that monitors developments and promotes comparative studies and collaborative projects in inclusive and special education. Fundamental reform processes to further develop inclusive education depend on the strategies and practices that teachers use in ordinary classrooms consisting of a diversity of learners. Comparative approaches help us

understand the development dynamics of support systems and set the possibilities and limits of inclusive education. Concepts from the Nordic and Anglophone countries, like Canada, are widely viewed as key sources of innovation (Köpfer, Powell, and Zahnd 2021).

Despite the recent focus on economic-utilitarian aspects and decentralisation, the Nordic countries have remained distinct in their support for equalised educational opportunities. Arnesen and Lundahl (2006, 285) argued, but also cautioned, about the consequences of the neoliberal turn. Today, as emphasised in the Special Issue contributions, the unity of the model is increasingly contested. This is also true, transdiscursively, of the broader questions of the Nordic welfare state and social models, often self-referential, that shape the external perception of Nordic countries via the global circulation of ideas (Rom-Jensen et al. 2022). Political shifts since the 1990s, influenced by economic crises and neoliberalism, have increased income inequality and affected participation in an increasingly market-oriented and decentralised education system (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2019), resulting in educational inequalities across the Nordic region (see e.g. Corral-Granados, Cecilia Rapp, and Smeplass 2023). Making comparisons across these contexts is rendered more difficult by the variability in the definitions and practices of special and inclusive education (Keles, ten Braak, and Munthe 2022), with persisting gaps in the research on exclusion and inequity (Wolff et al. 2021). Our analysis contributes to an understanding of contemporary challenges via an in-depth analysis of Sweden. We examine the state of special and inclusive education and the category of neurodivergence, challenging beliefs about Swedish education and the Nordic model.

Sweden, along with other Nordic countries like Iceland, has been viewed as a pioneer in inclusive education (Biermann and Powell 2014); however, each country has unique approaches, challenges and priorities, as evidenced in systematic cross-national comparisons (OECD 2012). Policy reforms over the past decade have focused on early intervention, teacher training, individualised support and resource allocation to promote inclusivity. Denmark aims to include pupils with SEN in general classrooms using early intervention and professional development for teachers, yet policies also emphasise increased standardisation, assessment and achievement as well as resource distribution instead of guaranteeing students' belonging (Engsig 2019). Finland, beyond having been successful in early cycles of PISA, which measured the performance on standardised student assessments of 15 year-olds, is also known for its highly inclusive education system built upon early identification and individualised support, highly qualified teachers with specialised training, flexible teaching methods to accommodate diverse learners, and collaborative multidisciplinary support teams (see e.g. Honkasilta, Pihlaja and Pesonen 2024). Iceland emphasises collaboration between general and special education teachers with very few special schools (Wolff et al. 2021), but with high classification rates (Powell et al. 2019). Norway supports inclusion through flexible learning environments and individualised education plans (Nes 2017). Sweden has historically aimed to provide equal opportunities for all students within mainstream educational settings, but recent studies have revealed complexities and the need for in-depth policy analysis (Paulsrud 2022). Such internal heterogeneity in the Nordic region is reflected in contemporary diverging pathways and gaps between research, policy and school realities. Understanding this conceptual challenge requires tracking the shifting relationship of special education and inclusive education. We aim to do so for Sweden over the past 15

years, first discussing how special and inclusive education developed and then delving into the current situation, reflected in the definition of and provision for pupils allocated to the category of neurodivergence.

## Contemporary analysis of the shifting relationship of special and inclusive education in Sweden

The present analysis illustrates the shifting relationship of special and inclusive education in Sweden by tracing the policy processes since 2011 and their (potential) impact. We limit our focus to compulsory education (preschool class through year 9), analysing the current Swedish reality and acknowledging the complexity of recent changes that are at odds with the institutionalised settings and logic of ‘one school for all’. Starting more broadly, we show not only the unexpected continuity of special settings in Sweden, but also their consolidation and even recent expansion. Following this, we narrow our focus to one category of pupils: those with neurodivergence, which, we argue, showcases the ongoing medicalisation of educational needs and the implications of diagnosis-based support systems. Methodologically, for our contemporary analysis, we analyse and synthesise research literature and government documents and leverage diverse data sources. The analysis relies on publicly available documents and educational data from government agencies and, to a lesser extent, national political parties. European harmonised data sources (statistics) from European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education (EASIE) are helpful for contextualisation and comparison. These data sources are complemented by research studies. The Swedish sources, where applicable, have been translated by the authors into English. They include:

- National Official School Unit Register
- Government documents such as relevant laws, ordinances, regulations, bills, memorandums, Government Committees of Inquiry directives and press releases
- Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU)
- Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) reports<sup>1</sup>
- Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) reports<sup>2</sup>
- Cross-party collaboration and coalition agreements.

In cross-country comparisons, Sweden has repeatedly been highlighted as a country with relatively few pupils enrolled in segregated special settings. As per an influential European Agency report (EADSNE 2003), only 1.3% of pupils were in segregated provisions in 2001. A quarter century later, the figures are not very different. According to EASIE (2020) country data, today circa 1% of the enrolled school population in Sweden has an official decision of having SEN, the majority of whom are attending special schools. This figure has varied only slightly since the commencement of the cross-national data collection on inclusive education in 2012/2013. Captured in the EASIE data from Sweden are only pupils with certain clinical diagnoses enrolled in legally prescribed state special schools with their own respective curricula: for blind or deaf pupils or those with severe language impairment, and schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities (SFS 2010, 800, Chap. 11–12). Compulsory schooling continues to largely operate

undifferentiated regarding the organisation of education, with an emphasis instead on pedagogical differentiation (Blossing and Söderström 2014). Schools 'must take into account the different needs of children and pupils', and all pupils, regardless of the reason, should be given 'support and stimulation so that they develop as far as possible', as specified in the 2011 Education Act (SFS 2010, 800, Chap.1, §4). Given the complete absence of a legal definition of SEN, no formal categorisation can be used for pupils who are given support (SPSM 2019); the EASIE country indicator does not completely capture the actual situation; more likely it is a misrepresentation. The 2011 Education Act explicitly stated that only in 'exceptional cases' may the principal decide to place any pupil in a special teaching group or provide individual teaching, if these placements offered better conditions for meeting a pupil's need for support (SFS 2010, 800, Chap. 3 §11). Based on our analysis of a decade of data from the SNAE (2023), the restrictive use of segregated forms of support seems to hold. On average, 1.3% of pupils received their instruction in special teaching groups, and 1.1% of pupils received individual teaching. However, there is research evidence suggesting that far more pupils are placed in special teaching groups than is shown in the official statistics (Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011; Malmqvist and Nilholm 2016). Many have noted that pupils are given this special support without it being documented, rendering it invisible in the national statistics (Andreasson, Asp-Onsjö, and Isaksson 2013; SNAE 2016). At the municipal level, information on special teaching groups is often absent (Westerberg 2023). Given the lack of formal guidelines on what extent and duration of segregated placements are to be counted as special support, individual schools or municipalities must interpret this. Decentralised data collection further problematises systemic updates and the validity of aggregate statistics and comprehensive overviews based upon them (see Eurydice 2023).

In the first quality review of special settings, conducted across selected schools, the SSI (2014a) found that pupils rarely returned to their regular classroom. While the report noted improvements in pupil participation, as well as academic and social development, it emphasised that this progress should be understood in relation to the previous dysfunctional school situation. Moreover, the improved academic performance was found to be a result of pupils' adapted education, in the form of having them drop subjects. The report concludes how this might have benefits in the short term but would result in difficulty in gaining entry to upper secondary programmes in the future and thus requires careful consideration.

Surprisingly enough, to date, and despite frequent critiques, there has been no systematic evaluation or monitoring of the quality of education provided in these settings. Teacher qualifications and competencies to work in special settings have been shown to be inadequate (Malmqvist and Nilholm 2016), and there is a risk that students will face low expectations, with an emphasis on social goals or pupil health rather than knowledge development (Malmqvist 2011; Westerberg 2023). Neither do data exist on how pupils fare as regards meeting their stipulated learning goals, even though the primary purpose of this placement is to support learning success. Qualitative studies have questioned whether the teaching in these settings results in improved learning as well as the extent to which it supports pupils' return to general classrooms (Hjörne and Säljö 2019). Thus, the SSI (2023) is currently undertaking the first known review of

teaching quality in special teaching groups. At this point, the scale of the investigation is not known, although the focus is on conditions for learning and knowledge development.

Despite the cautions expressed in both government reports and research studies as well as our limited understanding concerning effectiveness, since 2018 the political discourse in Sweden has strongly shifted towards more legally stipulated, segregated forms of education. The cooperation agreement between the political parties that formed the government after the elections in 2018 explicitly stated that ‘the idea of inclusion has gone too far: make it easier to receive special support in smaller teaching groups’ (Januariavtalet 2019). Similarly, the agreement signed by the new coalition government after the elections in 2022 stated ‘Efforts are to be made ... to enable more pupils to receive teaching in special teaching groups instead of in the class’ (Tidöavtalet 2022, 50). The driving argument in this political debate has been that pupils have not been provided special support in a timely manner. A directive for a recent government investigation stated that ‘the current regulation on support and special support has a strong inclusion perspective that in practice risks counteracting pupils’ opportunities to receive effective support’ (Kommittédirektiv 2024, 30; 13). The assumption now being touted is that students facing diverse learning difficulties will be able to achieve the desired learning outcomes in smaller groups. One could argue that, by promoting smaller groups, the politicians are not required to address the more overarching problems within the Swedish school system, including cultural and linguistic diversity, socioeconomic disparities and school segregation along ethnic lines (Löfstedt 2019).

The changed political priorities have since led to amendments to the Education Act and not only paved the way for principals to more openly and with financial support establish special teaching groups (SFS 2022b, 1315), but also led to a new development that is likely to re-shape the Swedish school landscape – the ‘resource school’ (Government Bill 2021/22: 156). Such schools only serve pupils in need of special support. Not entirely a new phenomenon, independent schools have been able to operate resource schools since the 2011 Education Act (SFS 2010, 800, Chap. 10, §35). Total population studies have shown that some independent schools have profiled themselves for pupils with SEN, often linked to a specific impairment or disability (Magnusson 2020). Mapping such schools, SNAE (2014) found that three-fourths of pupils were boys, more likely to be in grade 7 to 9 and had low goal attainment at the end of year 9. In the report, they stressed the need to carefully monitor the development of these settings, both in relation to pupil learning and from inclusion and equity perspectives. Despite these expressed concerns, there has been an upsurge in the formalisation of resource schools owing to a recent amendment to the Education Act (SFS 2022a, 724) and scaling up the reform.

Resource schools need to be differentiated from special teaching groups that are organised within the remit of the school by the principal. Resource schools are conceived within the framework of school choice for guardians, who can now freely choose a resource school (or do so based on advice from their current school). The main question is: Can the decision that a child needs special support truly be independent of the school context? This was one of the fundamental reasons why Sweden moved in the 1990s from using the terminology ‘pupils with a need for special support’ to ‘a pupil in need of special support’, the aim being to shift the focus from the individual pupil’s attributes to the school environment (SNAE 2005). This development is a move towards an institutional

logic of segregation associated with the most segregated education systems, like those in Germany (Biermann and Powell 2014).

We are not questioning the benefits of provision of additional resources, individual support or small classes – all are important to realising the human right of inclusive education for all. However, the problem lies in the ideological values underpinning these decisions, which are increasingly limited to student shortcomings, neglecting the multiple intersecting factors shaping school experiences and achievement. While the overrepresentation of pupils from minority ethnic groups and males in special teaching settings has been noted (e.g. Berhanu and Dyson 2012), the disproportionality is even more evident in the case of special schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities. During the past 5 years, these schools have seen a 30% increase in categorical membership (SNAE 2024a), mainly involving pupils with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and considerable overrepresentation of boys. In academic year 2022–23, 44% of students had two parents with a foreign background<sup>3</sup> and almost two-thirds were boys. The increasing numbers and overrepresentation of certain groups in special schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities are even more concerning in the context of the quality of education offered and the long-term consequences of attending such a school form (Richardson and Powell 2011). While transitions to non-segregated settings have not been on the agenda since the beginning of the 2000s, attention has been paid to strengthening the knowledge focus, academic content and staff competencies (SOU 2021, 11). Nonetheless, recent data from the SNAE (2024b) found that only 12% of teachers in these schools were qualified. Participating in this special school form has been shown to have dire consequences for pupils' future learning opportunities, with limited post-education options, and thus for their life chances. Most leavers have an unpaid occupation through the Daily Activities initiative, and a significant number is in neither employment nor in education or training (NEET) (Arvidsson 2016).

To delve further into the shift in institutionalisation away from inclusion, we turn to one category of pupils – neurodivergence. The common terminology used to refer to this group is *neuropsykiatriska funktionsnedsättningar* (verbatim translation: neuropsychiatric disabilities), the English equivalent of which would be neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDs). These include a range of diagnoses according to the medical diagnostic system, but within the Swedish school context it is predominantly understood as a label for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum conditions (Bölte et al. 2021). Low academic outcomes and high levels of school absenteeism have made NDs central to the contemporary debates and discussions around schooling and education. No official statistics are available, as maintaining a register of disabilities is not permitted in Sweden, but there is strong evidence to suggest that pupils with NDs are (much) more likely than their typically developing peers to demonstrate low academic outcomes (Holmberg and Bölte 2014; Stark et al. 2021). The notion that pupils with NDs constitute a risk group for school absenteeism was highlighted in a Swedish Government Official Report (SOU 2016, 94). Even surveys administered by disability organisations over the past 8 years have identified increasing levels of school absenteeism among pupils (Autism Sverige 2022; Riksförbundet Attention 2023).

Increasingly evident medicalisation as the reason for these negative school outcomes has come to the fore via conclusions drawn in government reports, research studies and disability organisation surveys. The lack of knowledge about NDs among school staff and

schools' inability to fully meet the educational needs of those with NDs are the most often stated reasons (e.g. SSI 2014b; 2023, Anderson 2020, Bölte et al. 2021, Autism Sverige 2022, Riksförbundet Attention 2023). This categorical view has recently strongly shaped government priorities and programmes, with a targeted focus on increasing teachers' knowledge about NDs.

In Autumn 2018, it was mandated that 15 credits on neurodevelopmental conditions be included in the existing special educator and special teacher programmes, which are advanced professional programmes consisting of 90 credits (Ministry of Education 2017). Closely following this, in 2021, increased competence in addressing neurodevelopmental conditions was added as an amended objective in the curriculum for all teacher education programmes (Ministry of Education 2020). Analysing government memoranda, Österborg Wiklund et al. (2023, 15) concluded that neurodivergent pupils are 'framed within a deficit approach as neurobiological, individual impairment, and a special educational problem that should be managed by professionals'.

Simultaneously, increased targeted efforts have been made to increase the knowledge of teachers already working in schools. Here, we elaborate on how these efforts have intensified during the past few years. In March 2023, the National Agency for Special Needs Education released a brand-new web-based study programme on NDs,<sup>4</sup> which includes facts about ADHD and autism, pedagogical strategies and approaches. Close on its heels, in the Government's Spring Supplementary budget, 27.5 million Swedish kronor were allocated to improving education for one category of pupils: those with NDs (Ministry of Education 2023). Of these, 5 million were allocated to SNAE and National Agency for Special Needs Education for developing and implementing (new) ND content in current teacher professional development programmes. This was further clarified in a press release (Ministry of Education 2023) with the headline 'Children and pupils with neurodevelopmental disabilities will receive better support', stating that 'It is important that preschool teachers and teachers have sufficient competence when it comes to providing support to children and students with NDs'.

In an even more recent development, the political focus on developing teachers' categorical knowledge about NDs has been taken a step further. The Government Committee of Inquiry directive (Kommittédirektiv 2023, 111; 14) on how to increase the quality of teacher education explicitly mentions NDs linked to the knowledge base of cognitive science. It states: 'how knowledge about neurodevelopmental disabilities can be strengthened by taking a clearer starting point in cognitive science in order to provide future teachers with practically useful knowledge about this group of students'.

Of the previously mentioned Government Spring Supplementary budget 2023 (Ministry of Education 2023), twenty million kroners were invested to establish or develop adapted learning environments with a few pupils and a high staffing ratio, in other words – special teaching groups. This amount equalled half of the already existing government yearly budget for this purpose allocated to all students, now limited to pupils with NDs. Clearly, the recent amendments to the Education Act for increased special teaching groups (SFS 2022b, 1315) and resource schools (SFS 2022a, 724) are not for all, but mainly for those with certain diagnoses. The tendency towards diagnosis-based grouping in school is not new and has been identified previously (Giota and Emanuelsson 2011; Malmqvist and Nilholm 2016). However, increasingly medical diagnoses like ADHD are major determinants of the

type of support and interventions received (Evaldsson and Karlsson 2012; Malmqvist 2018). The dramatic change made recently is that this approach has become officially sanctioned, rather than an exception identified only in certain schools and municipalities. This is likely to result in the growth of diagnosis-based special teaching groups and resource schools that use Autism and ADHD as their profile areas, a trend previously identified among independent schools (Tah 2019). This development, in combination with the controversial but rapidly increasing diagnoses of ADHD and autism (Giacobini et al. 2018; Jablonska, Ohlis, and Dal 2022), is likely to result in a vicious cycle of supply and demand – a push for diagnosis to gain entry to these settings and their expansion. Simultaneously, diagnosing more children will require a greater number of special settings, a self-fulfilling prophecy and long-term development seen in many countries (e.g. Tomlinson 2017).

The needs-based support system stipulated by the Education Act and the evidently increasing push towards provision of support based on a diagnostic category constitute a site of tension. A recent report by the Swedish School Inspectorate (2023) investigated how schools work to create accessible learning environments for pupils with NDs. The reason for conducting this evaluation was the identified risk of insufficient knowledge of how teaching can be optimised for pupils with NDs. What is evident here is the narrow focus on accessibility and teaching environments linked solely to the diagnosis. This homogeneity and medicalisation of need for students with NDs often portrayed in political debates, policy discourses, government reports, school experiences and media accounts have resulted in political interventions being restricted to the diagnosis – with little recognition of how pupils' experiences, opportunities and outcomes could be impacted by other forms of intersecting diversity. Ample evidence of the over-representation of certain ethnic, gender and socioeconomic groups within this group has largely been bypassed (Hornborg et al. 2023; Kawa et al. 2017), as have differences in diagnostic rates across municipalities in Sweden (Jablonska, Ohlis, and Dal 2022; Socialstyrelsen 2019).

The medicalised understanding driving educational debates about pupils with NDs is largely disconnected from the wider debates on the ongoing educational crisis in Swedish schools, where the effects of de-centralisation, privatisation, increased immigration and residential segregation dominate (Kornhall and Bender 2019), compounded by the persistent lack of qualified teachers, teacher attrition, poor working conditions for teachers and drastic cuts in school budgets (Boström 2023). This psycho-medical framing of NDs is likely to result in continued neglect of the societal and school-based environmental factors that underlie the problems at school (Malmqvist 2018), but even more significantly a disregard for other factors that shape young people's educational lives (Taneja-Johansson 2021).

Thus, the contemporary Swedish case manifests two consequential shifts: to a categorical approach to the differentiation of some pupils, coupled with a shift in their allocation to separate or even segregated organisational forms of schooling that are not commensurate with the human right to inclusive education. This illustrates how contemporary policy processes in Sweden lead to path divergence – away from inclusive

education and towards special education settings that stigmatise and do not offer the same learning opportunities.

### Is Sweden's education system moving away from 'one school for all'?

In Sweden, the balance between special and inclusive education has clearly shifted, influenced by changing priorities and understandings of what constitutes equity in education. In exploring contemporary developments, we found increasing disparities between traditional educational values, policies and practices in education. Contrary to the common narrative of a disconnect between policy and practice (e.g. Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011), we revealed the intensification of a changing policy discourse (shown for earlier years by Paulsrud 2022). The temporal changes in policy and practice have reshaped education in Sweden, moving away from 'one school for all', one of the Nordic region's hallmarks.

Sweden has undergone a shift towards more separate or segregated educational settings, such as special teaching groups and resource schools, which contrasts with the region's foundational principles of inclusion and equalised learning opportunities. This shift, we have argued, reflects a broader reorientation in educational (and social) policy. This is manifest in the heightened focus on neurodivergence. While the intention is to better support students with special needs, it runs the risk of entrenching a medicalised perspective instead of exploring complex sociocultural factors influencing pupils' outcomes and life chances. The increasing use of diagnostic categories to determine educational support underscores the need for a balanced approach that considers both system-related contextual factors and individual needs, which interactively affect educational equity, achievement and attainment.

Moreover, the emphasis on specialised support highlights the critical role of teacher training. Recent investments in professional development for addressing neurodevelopmental diversity should be part of a broader strategy that provides educators the skills needed to foster inclusive classrooms. Effective inclusion requires ongoing support and resources for teachers, alongside a commitment to developing teaching practices that accommodate such diverse learning needs, especially as awareness of such support needs grows.

Data and monitoring also play a crucial role in (re)shaping educational policies. Current limitations in data on the impact of special education settings and inclusive practices underscore the need for more comprehensive data and transparent evaluation. To ensure that reforms align with the goal of inclusivity, policymakers must prioritise robust data collection and analysis; this has traditionally been difficult in Sweden due to the hesitance to classify (which also represents a dimension of education in which the Nordic countries differ considerably, see Biermann and Powell 2014).

Ultimately, the evolving landscape of education in Sweden calls for a nuanced understanding of the balance between specialised support and inclusive practices. Addressing the underlying causes of educational segregation, including socioeconomic and ethnic disparities that reflect extraordinary migration flows, will be essential in achieving true educational equity.

Thus, the Nordic education model, renowned for its commitment to inclusivity and high standards, but also challenged as a 'floating signifier' (Krejsler 2023), may no

longer be valid due to the transformations of education systems that have occurred in response to evolving political, economic and social pressures in the five Nordic countries (see literature review by Corral-Granados, Cecilia Rapp, and Smepllass 2023). While the Nordic countries, Sweden included, have historically set a global benchmark for equitable education, recent developments we uncovered reveal a growing divergence across the region. Such change is also reflected in the significant variation across Europe in the extent and quality of inclusive schooling, influenced by institutional structures and teaching practices (Köpfer, Powell, and Zahnd 2021). The Nordic countries, which many continue to be viewed as models of equity and inclusive education, are idealised, but this ascription, we argue, is no longer accurate, because the achievement of equity and inclusion is an ongoing process, characterised by continuous adjustments and reforms, including backlash. Concentrating on contemporary policymaking and programme developments within Sweden has revealed that the region exhibits internal diversity. We find divergent institutionalisation pathways and important gaps in our knowledge about educational and social policies as well as school realities.

To emphasise the current policy direction, we explored developments related to the dynamic category of neurodivergence. Although this is only one category of pupils, we argue that it showcases the implications of diagnosis-based support systems and the ongoing medicalisation of educational needs. The complexities and challenges of providing appropriate support for neurodivergent students within inclusive education frameworks demand further discussion, not only in Sweden. Charting the development away from inclusive schooling underscored the need for further comparative studies (such as those in this Special Issue) to gain insights into current developments across the Nordic region. This approach can help contextualise the findings within broader educational trends and policies. Numerous questions remain, including the long-term impacts of the shift towards standardised testing and curriculum adjustments on student outcomes and equity, the effectiveness (and unanticipated consequences) of recent educational reforms in Sweden to specifically address the needs of neurodivergent students, and how teacher training programmes and other longer-term investments can improve the context to better support all learners, even those who are neurodivergent.

We provided a critical view of the state of inclusive education in Sweden, highlighting the impact of political shifts. The findings underscore the importance of reflecting on and revising contemporary mythologies surrounding the 'Nordic model' to better align with evolving educational contexts as well as visions of the future within the region and globally (Hansen and Jóhannesson 2023). Further (comparative) studies are needed to understand how inclusive education can promote equity and support for all learners given these shifts.

## Notes

1. The SSI is a government agency charged with ensuring that all students are provided an equal education of good quality. They carry out quality reviews and school inspections.
2. The SNAE is responsible for official statistics on education and conducts national follow-ups and evaluations.

3. This statistic is available only for the 2020–21 academic year. It excludes students with one foreign-born parent and does not account for parents' ethnic backgrounds, focusing solely on their birthplace.
4. <https://www.spsm.se/studiepaket-npf>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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