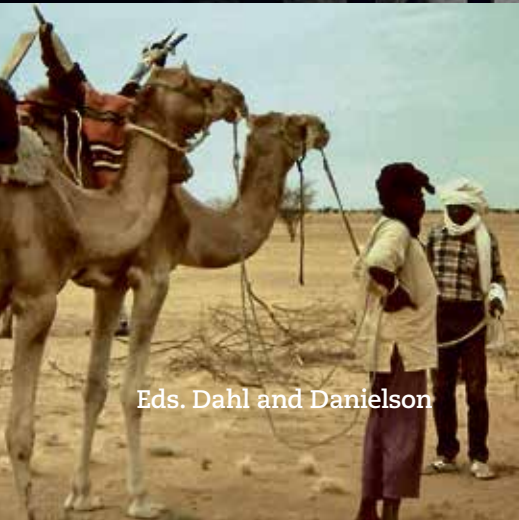




# Faculty of Social Sciences Stockholm University 1964 – 2014



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# Department of Special Education

Siv Fischbein, Margareta Ahlström, Inger Assarson,  
Lise Roll-Pettersson and Mara Westling Allodi

**HISTORICALLY**, special education has been part of the academic discipline of education. When the compulsory school was introduced in Sweden, it soon became obvious that some children had difficulties following the curriculum in the same time and at the same pace as their schoolmates. The reason for this could be individual factors such as intellectual disabilities as well as environmental circumstances, for instance socio-economic adversities. This challenge was either met by prolonging the time available for the student or by reducing the content of the course. In several countries with a compulsory school system, there was, however, a discussion about adjusting teaching to the variation among pupils. This led to the organisation of 'special education' as a practice, for instance special classes for children with intellectual disabilities. In France, Alfred Binet was assigned by the government to construct a test to select children for such classes. The history of intelligence testing in

that way became closely connected to special education.

To understand why special education has become a separate subject at Stockholm University, it is necessary to briefly describe the historical development of the academic discipline of education. Originally, the discipline was part of philosophy at Swedish universities. In 1910, the first Swedish professor of education was installed in Uppsala. His name was Bertil Hammer. He had a broad view of the discipline, which meant he included behavioural, societal, didactical and philosophical perspectives. His followers were mostly interested in psychological aspects. During the first part of the twentieth century, the discipline remained practically synonymous with psychology. In 1953, psychology became a separate subject. Many of the professors in education chose to transfer from education to psychology. From then on, the educational science subject gradually changed towards educational sociology

and philosophy. It must be remembered, however, that as late as the beginning of the 1960s the courses in education and psychology were practically identical at Stockholm University. In the 1970s and 1980s, drastic changes took place. Theories of environmental circumstances instead of ideas about individual prerequisites began to dominate the educational discipline, not only in Stockholm but generally in Sweden and other countries.

### **Stockholm Institute of Education**

The Department of Education at the Stockholm Institute of Education (the Teachers' Training College, LHS) had a long tradition of behavioural research. Torsten Husén had used data from Swedish conscripts to study the relations between ability and social background, occupation, length of schooling and school performance. This was the start of several very successful longitudinal studies. Husén also became involved in twin studies as a method to investigate the relations between genetic and environmental influences. Bengt-Olov Ljung was one of his many doctoral students. He became a professor in education at the Institute when Husén moved to Stockholm University to become the first professor in international education. This was another of his main research interests. He was the initiator of the large international comparative studies, performed within the International Educational Association

(IEA). Today this has turned into well-known systems of pupil testing, such as PISA and PIRLS. Ljung was also a major spokesman for the behavioural tradition in education. He had written his thesis about the growth spurt during adolescence. When he retired in the 1980s, a struggle took place between the behavioural tradition and its rivalling sociological and philosophical perspectives. One of the applicants for the professorship was Siv Fischbein, who had had both Husén and Ljung as supervisors. Her thesis, based on twin studies, emphasised the importance of the interactional influences of both genetic and environmental factors. In the appointment procedure, her research was considered psychological and not educational, reflecting the change of educational sciences from a focus on behavioural aspects towards societal and philosophical perspectives.

### **The Department of Special Education**

Supplementary education for regular teachers to become teachers in special education had been given at the Stockholm Institute of Education (LHS), from 1962 but to a fairly limited extent and without any connection to research at the educational department. In 1990, however, a new education for special pedagogues was started. The ambition was to make it scientifically based and more research oriented. The programme comprised one and a half year and was divided into four different streams: 'Com-

plicated Learning Situations’, ‘Deafness and Hearing Deficiency’, ‘Blindness and Visual Deficiency’ and ‘Intellectual Deficiency’. From the beginning, these streams were clearly separated. They catered to different school systems: the ordinary compulsory school and special schools for deaf, blind and intellectually disabled children. Gradually, some common contents were developed for these different streams, forming a general course, which incorporated 10 to 20 of the 60 credit points. The ambition was to give the students different perspectives on special education: a behavioural, societal, philosophical and historical perspective. The course included knowledge about pupils in need of special support, considering individual aspects and environmental circumstances as well as ethical questions and aspects pertaining to justice and human rights. Above all, emphasis was laid on the interaction of individual and environmental influences in different situations and on the need to adjust the school system to pupil variation. Before 1990, there had been different educations for special teachers depending upon which pupil group they were catering to: intellectual or speech difficulties and hearing or sight deficiencies. The students enrolled in such education often had extensive experience working with pupils that had functional deficiencies. However, the educational authorities considered this streaming of education as reflecting a compensating strategy, trying

to change pupils instead of adjusting the setting to suite them. The new teacher training in special education that started in 1990 was therefore more concerned with the supervision of regular teachers and headmasters instead of work with individual pupils. The students recruited to this new supplementary teacher education were preschool teachers as well as regular teachers. Gradually, the educational streams oriented to intellectual deficiencies and complicated learning situations were combined. In the long run, knowledge about pupil deficiencies and didactic aspects—such as early reading, writing and mathematics learning—were reduced in favour of more theoretical and philosophical aspects on special education. Questions concerning the participation and inclusion of pupils in need of special education were given priority.

### **Research in special education**

At the end of the 1980s a temporary professorship had been advertised at the Department of Special Education. Ingemar Emanuelsson, who was the first doctoral student of Bengt-Olov Ljung, applied for and received this position. Emanuelsson was also raised in the behavioural tradition. Over time, however, he became more interested in the importance of including all children at school and how the educational system could be changed to promote it. When he moved to Gothenburg in 1990, he was suc-

ceeded by Siv Fischbein. In 1995, the appointment was changed to a permanent professorship. Fischbein became the first female professor at LHS. She remained in that position for fifteen years and was a strong advocate for making special education into a separate discipline at Stockholm University. This was difficult since the academic traditions were fairly weak at the Department of Special Education. The main research at the LHS had been performed at Department of Education.

The supplementary special teacher education that started in 1990 included an examination paper at the C-level. This implied that around 200 students each year had to be trained in scientific theory and methodology as well as supervised and examined. This was a challenge. Only two persons at the Department, Siv Fischbein and Gunnar Kylén, had a doctoral degree. The latter initiated research focused on persons with intellectual disabilities and their dependence on a stimulating environment.

After some years, the recruitment of researchers with varying perspectives on special education – behavioural, societal, handicap- and praxis-oriented – began.

A programme grant for six years was given to Fischbein by the Research Council for Working Life and Social Sciences (SFR/FAS) for a project named ‘Pupils in Special Educational Activities’ (ESV). This project underlined the necessity to combine behavioural, societal and

didactical perspectives on special education. Another important project was financed by Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson’s Foundation and the purpose was to investigate students at risk for exclusion in the upper secondary school (GURU). The approach was societal and philosophical, focusing on experiences of teachers and the possibilities for students at risk of exclusion to succeed in the Swedish school system. Other colleagues at the Department were successfully granted EU and SIDA projects (about video telephone for people with intellectual deficiencies; people with low vision in Botswana and Tanzania, and alternative communication in Russia).

In 1995, many new professors in special education had been appointed in the Nordic countries. Together with these partners, courses were arranged for our doctoral students, who since the start of LHS were formally examined at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Stockholm University, since LHS lacked independent rights of doctoral examination. Scandinavian colleagues were engaged as opponents and representatives in examination boards as well as experts in the appointment of applicants for academic positions in special education in our different countries. While special education was a fairly new subject in Sweden and Denmark, Norway and Finland had a long tradition and four professors already in 1948. Contributing to the good cooperation was an

interest that the two female professors in Finland and Sweden had in common. They were both breeding horses and passionate visitors to horse races. The probability for this to happen must be practically zero!

### **A department without a letter-box**

In 2002 there was a major reorganisation at LHS. Three new departments were established: the departments of Individual, Society and Learning (IOL); Society, Culture and Learning (SKL); and Teaching Processes, Communication and Learning (UKL). These departments were thought to represent the behavioural, societal and didactic streams in education. Special education was included in IOL – a major disadvantage since it made it more difficult to maintain the interactional and interdisciplinary character of the subject. It was also perceived as a risk that special education would again be classified as a subject with a focus on pupil problems and compensating strategies. There was a discussion about where doctoral students in special education should be placed, since they could potentially have a behavioural, societal or didactic focus. The professor in a subject could not choose which department to whom he/she should belong, but teachers and doctoral students could do that.

The area of the new department, IOL, comprised special education and child and youth science. In the former subject, the streaming of

the special educational programme disappeared. Instead, there were basic course and optional course alternatives. The teaching of child and youth science focused on the education of preschool and leisure time teachers. The number of persons belonging to this subject was considerably larger than those belonging to special education. Preschool education dominated the new department and it was difficult for special education to maintain its status as a separate subject. It virtually became invisible. One of the lecturers in special education said that it was like a subject without a letter-box. The students in the special educational programme were also protesting against the institutional invisibility. In addition, they maintained that they received too little knowledge of neuropsychiatric diagnoses and reading and writing problems/dyslexia.

In that situation it became very important to convince the Faculty of Social Sciences at the university to make it possible for doctoral students to become doctors in special education and not in education. In 2003, special education became a separate research subject with its own doctoral students. A thesis in special education covered a broad field, from individual development and family background to societal perspectives, as well as didactic questions. Another trend in research and production of literature has been the close relationships between theory and practice. Fischbein worked for many years teaching and writing books and articles together

with experienced teachers and teacher educators. Rolf Helldin, the successor to Fischbein as professor in special education, started several development projects with cities and municipalities sending students to supplementary education. Generally, one can say that behavioural, societal and didactic perspectives have mutually stimulated the special educational field.

### **Special education – an interdisciplinary subject**

Making special education a research subject separate from general education was one way of enhancing its visibility. Another fruitful approach was to start cooperation both nationally and internationally with other disciplines.

Together with Per-Anders Rydelius, professor in child and youth psychiatry at *Karolinska Institutet*, and Eva Björck Åkesson, professor in special education/habilitation at Mälardalen University College, we initiated cooperation in master's and doctoral studies, research projects and seminars. This project was called Forum for Special Education and was funded by the Swedish Research Council. This was a way to combine influences from different subjects and achieve interdisciplinary cooperation, which is vital for both research and practice. Psychological knowledge, for instance about cognition and emotions related to learning and the formation of self-concepts, has to be in focus as well as biological factors,

physical development, neurophysiology and disabilities of different kinds. Environmental influences at the societal, institutional and group level can be categorized as sociology or social psychology. In the philosophical field, power relations and questions of justice are important as well as conceptualizations of normality and diversity. Ethics is also an important area in special education, where you risk defining problems in a biased way from an advantaged position. Critical educational theory is relevant wherever the impacts of societal changes or humanistic and epistemological perspectives on special education are studied. The physical/technical field of research is also necessary to include in special education. In recent years there has been an amazing development in this area, helping many children and adults to optimal achievement. Above all, however, the significance of the interaction between individual prerequisites and environmental influences is recognised. This implies incorporating different theoretical perspectives at varying levels: risk factors in individual development, leadership and group processes to prevent exclusion, and participation and justice in education and society. Functional disabilities are central in all these areas. A person with a functional disability tends to be at risk of being marginalised and excluded in different situations. Special education is thus engaged in questions of participation and influ-

ence at the individual, group and societal levels.

In this multifaceted field of practice and research, cooperation with persons from other disciplines and professions makes it easier to see possibilities instead of obstacles. The interlocutors and cooperation partners can be teachers, special educators, social workers, physical therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, medical doctors', etc. An important area both for practical involvement and as a research topic is the cooperation between parents and school professionals where questions of power relations and submissiveness are in focus. The more perspectives that are taken into consideration, the better we can handle critical educational situations involving children, youth and grown-ups in risk of marginalisation.

Theory and practice must be combined with ethical judgments, as well as mobilising varying perspectives on special educational situations. On the one hand, there is a risk that everyone is treated similarly irrespective of individual differences and experiences, and on the other, that there is too narrow an individual diagnosis. A pervasive problem is balancing the need to use the most up-to-date understanding of how different functional deficiencies work and the resources that can be mobilised to remediate or compensate them, along with the risks of stigmatisation and marginalisation as-

sociated with diagnoses. How can individual needs be apprehended without losing the awareness of how the general teaching environment can be improved to benefit all? These are ethical problems that teachers in special education as well as their students in their future professional life always have to deal with.

Special education is internationally an established discipline with varying focus in different countries. Often there is a tendency to sort out children in the educational system and to gear the education to issues about how you can compensate for shortcomings, e.g. functional disabilities. In other instances the whole variation of individual capacities is included in the teaching of special education, and the expression "exceptional children" is used. Some countries have a long tradition of using alternative tools to include all children in regular activities. In both Norway and Finland, special education has been an established discipline for a long time with its own professors and doctoral studies. When, as was earlier the case in Sweden and Denmark, general education incorporates special education, the problem is that the average educational situations come into focus rather than the special situations. An interdisciplinary and interactional approach, working in cooperation with other countries, makes it possible to enhance research and education in special education from a holistic perspective and avoid some of these pitfalls.



### Research from year 2008

When the Stockholm Institute of Education, LHS, was incorporated into Stockholm University in January 2008, the Department of Special Education was reborn and the possibilities to develop the subject further increased. Doctoral studies, as well as the basic and advanced courses in the discipline of special education and the supplementary programme for special educators, became part of the Faculty for Social Sciences. We can today proudly say that the Department of Special Education is the only one in Sweden.

In the following, some of the important areas of research that are pursued in the new department will be presented. The Department of Special Education has cemented its position in scientific research in many different areas of interest.

#### *Disabilities from a lifespan perspective*

This research cluster is led by Professors Ulla Ek and Lise Roll-Pettersson. Individuals with disabilities and their families are confronted with barriers inherent in policies, attitudes, and services, which can lead to significant consequences such as reduced learning opportunities, lower quality of life and isolation over the course of their lifespan. The focus of research in this area is on addressing these mechanisms within inclusive and specialized preschool or school settings (and habilitation services) as a

means to pragmatically establish optimal developmental and learning opportunities. Interventional, as well as descriptive, research concerning the development and learning of children and youth (0–22 years) with neurodevelopmental issues (autism, ADHD, intellectual disabilities), sensory impairments and co-occurrence of diagnoses will be conducted. This area deals with the multi-dimensional examination of a variety of interrelated variables such as: communication/language, social (e.g. play) and cognitive development, in addition to environmental aspects such as classroom climate, professional competence, attitudes and perceived efficacy. These issues can also be studied comparatively, looking at both Swedish and culturally diverse families.

In Sweden, there is a lack of studies on the effects of psycho-educational intervention targeting children and youth with autism (ASD) and ADHD (SBU) as well as hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities. A major purpose of the research group is to contribute to meeting this societal need. This relevance is underscored by the rising prevalence of neurodevelopmental disabilities. Most probably teachers and special educators will come in contact with a child/pupil with ASD or ADHD difficulties.

The Department of Special Education is building an interdisciplinary multi-professional consortium within the Stockholm region with

the purpose of developing and implementing sustainable socially valid interventions for individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities across their lifespan. There are three main national partners: The Consortium is made up of the Center of Neurodevelopmental Disorders at *Karolinska Institutet* (KIND), the Psychology Division at *Karolinska Institutet* the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, in cooperation with the Neuropsychiatry Assessment Unit at Sachs' Children and Youth Hospital (Sachs), the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Stockholm (BUP), PRIMA Psychiatry Stockholm and the Centre for Habilitation and Health Stockholm. It is coordinated with four major neurodevelopmental parental and interest organizations.

The Karolinska-Huddinge collaboration includes several ongoing projects concerning visual outcome for children with optic nerve hypoplasia, and visual and perceptual outcome after allogeneic stem cell transplantations.

For the 'National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools' (*Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten*, SPSM), the partnership is concerned with visual impairments as well as cognitive and intellectual disabilities.

At present we have in this field of research three main international collaborative partner setups. The first is the Frank Porter Graham Development Institute at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The institute

conducts prominent research and outreach in early childhood special education in the USA concerning disabilities, families and learning environments. Especially recognized is their research concerning early intervention and educational interventions for children/pupils with neurodevelopmental disabilities (i.e. autism spectrum disorders and co-occurring diagnosis). Secondly, the Department of Special Education has also been part of the European Commission Leonardo Project and collaborated with universities in Northern Ireland, Iceland, Italy, England, Holland, Norway, Germany, and Spain in developing an instructional multi-media programme with a psycho-educational learning theoretical focus on autism interventions and will hopefully continue with comparative studies. Finally, our unique master's programme in visual impairment is given in collaboration with NTNU (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim) and entails ongoing collaboration and development of research projects.

*Learning environments, didactics and inclusive education in school and preschool*

This second research cluster is led by Professor Mara Westling Allodi (successor of Rolf Hellidin). It is conducting research with a variety of approaches and contents that nevertheless has the common denominator of focusing on describing, assessing and evaluating the special

educational policies, activities, strategies and methods that are practiced. The aim is to identify promising approaches that should be employed in educational situations and organizations, in order to prevent difficulties that can arise in learning environments – intended in a broad meaning – and to support optimal learning, participation and equity in the educational system and in society. In contrast to other and still prevalent applications and interpretations of Special Educational research in Sweden, which have taken a rather practice-distant, predominantly theoretical stance, or also an exclusively critical standpoint in relation to practice,

this research field wants to contribute to bridging the gap between research and practice. This can be done by various means: through the development of practices through theory and evidence-based interventions, prevention programmes, participatory research, collaboration with stakeholders and internationalization.

#### *Democracy and fundamental values*

The third cluster is led by Senior Lecturer Ulf Sivertun. Research within inclusive education reveals how segregation based on culture, social class, gender, disability and knowledge bring about negative consequences for person-



The staff of the Department after the move to Frescati. (Photo: Eleonor Svensson Lindholm)

al development as well as the learning development of students. Concepts like democracy, justice, and ethics are at the center of the analysis in which society's design as well as views of humanity, values issues, and views of knowledge are critically examined from a historic perspective in which ruling discursive power relations are in focus.

Research within the cluster concerns structures of power and justice, where democracy, equity and ethics are in focus. Praxis related research projects scrutinize how different actions and educational settings in school create constraints and boundaries and how tensions between homogeneity and heterogeneity, as well as between the individual and the collective, are managed. This extensive analysis is relevant for studies of those groups of students regarded as being in need of special support. The research area includes among others studies of school systems, school organizations and resources, the organization of support and working environment.

The Department also houses independent researchers, and among their interests we can mention multiple disabilities with a focus on communicative and cognitive disabilities, and the use of aesthetical methods in connection with cognitive and linguistic impairment. Finally, one project deals with the use of creative play in longitudinal formative intervention, using inspiration from Vygotsky.

### **Basic courses and master's programmes on an advanced level**

The Department offers courses in special needs education within the general teacher training programmes, and several basic courses such as 'Special Education 1', 'Intellectual Disability 1', and 'Development and Mental Health of Children'. On the advanced level we have two programmes educating 'Special Educational Needs' teachers and 'Special Needs Training' teachers. These professions are highly requested and the latter programme is expanded by being much more than doubled, from 100 students to 285, in 2015. As the only department of this kind in Sweden, we offer a Master's programme in 'Specialization in Visual Impairment Pedagogy'.

All the above described programmes are offered in Swedish. However, the Department offers a few courses in English for both Swedish and our international students. A good many international agreements with other European universities under the Erasmus programme, as well as bilateral departmental agreements for students outside the EU, have been established.



The new department building at Frescati Hage, previously housing the IT Services.  
(Photo: Björn Dalin)



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