This is the published version of a paper published in *Education Inquiry*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Editorial introduction
*Education Inquiry*, 6(1): 1-4
https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.27267

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-135096
Editorial Introduction

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The thematic section in this issue of Education Inquiry deals with articles concerning the science and practice of special education. It includes research on the mathematical achievement and emotional-cognitive profiles of young people, the role of schools as organisations in the provision of special education, issues regarding inclusion and intellectual impairment, future work content of special educators, and topics related to adult dyslexia. One special feature of this issue of the journal is that there are contributions by Swedish and Finnish authors, thereby allowing the possibility to compare special education in these countries.

After reading all of the articles in this thematic section, the reader will notice that special education is a broad area; it deals with issues at the individual level as well as various system levels. All of the articles here have a special education focus. They tell a story about the importance of understanding the frameworks for quality learning, including anticipating, informing, being aware, and having open communication. Common to these stories is the aim to remove barriers from learning, which is the core objective of special education.

When writing, authors have to choose specific terms to describe the phenomena they are researching. The author has to decide if the ‘right’ phrasing is intellectual impairment, cognitive disability, or perhaps mental retardation. In his article, Ineland chose to write about intellectual disabilities. Nyroos, Jonsson, Korhonen and Eklöf write about at-risk children, and their work provides an interesting and necessary extension of the notion of ‘risk’. Another concept they discuss does not refer to special education, special needs or extra modifications, but to special educational provisions. Pirttimaa, Takala and Ladonlahti talk about reading difficulties and about dyslexia as a subgroup of learning difficulties. The choice of wording depends on many issues and seems to vary in different countries and contexts as well as across generations of researchers. In Sweden, words like funktionshinder (free translation: ‘barriers to action’) and inlärningssvårighet (‘learning difficulties’) are used. There are no exact statistics in Sweden on the reasons someone receives a certain type of support at school. However, the number

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©Authors. ISSN 2000-4508, pp. 1–4

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Citation: Education Inquiry (EDUI) 2015, 6, 27267, http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.27267
of existing Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) is known. An IEP has been written for almost 14% of all school-aged children. The number of IEPs is highest in the ninth grade where 21% of boys and 16% of girls have an IEP (Skolverket, 2013).

In Finland, up until 2010 Statistics Finland was recording the reason some children attended part-time special education. The most common reason was a reading or writing disorder and the second was a learning difficulty in mathematics. The smallest group was difficulties in adjustment or emotional disorder. In total, there were six different categories. However, when the Basic Educational Act was amended in Finland in 2010 the reasons were no longer asked. Now the statistics only show the form of support (general, intensified or special) as well as the place where the support is received (totally or partly in regular education or in special education) (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2007; 2014).

In Sweden, the National Agency for Education (Skoverket 2014) published a book about extra modifications, special support and IEPs. The publication emphasises the need for schools to do everything possible with regard to pedagogy, organisation, and environmental issues in order to promote learning. If a pupil still does not reach the goals, the first step towards help is called extra modifications (anpassningar) and no official decision is needed to use them. If that is not enough, special support (särskild stöd) can be given. When using this kind of terminology, the challenge of learning is common to all actors at schools. It is not possible to just point to the child, because one must examine the entire system and pedagogy. Wording is essential and guides our thoughts. The Finnish and the Swedish systems are starting to resemble each other in the sense that there are different kinds of needs and the teachers need to respond to these needs with various forms of support coupled with excellent pedagogy.

One commonly used word within various contents is inclusion. In this journal, Ineland uses inclusion when different schools are merged together in the name of inclusive policy. Again, it seems that an inclusive policy is an excellent goal, but putting it into practice is a challenge. This is not new information, and it is actually surprising that inclusion is still difficult to implement. We need more studies about successful inclusion in the future. The articles by Pirttimaa et al. and Nyroos et al. both talk about learning, especially the emotional element involved in learning in addition to the cognitive element. The emotional element seems to be most crucial for learning as well as for future development and success. These articles make it clear that technical knowledge of learning difficulties is not enough for educators. Interestingly, the emotional element was not mentioned in a newly published dissertation about mathematical learning difficulties and interventions (Mononen 2014), demonstrating the importance of the results presented in Nyroos et al. in this issue. In addition, school-related happiness has been noticed to be low among students in special education (Uusitalo et al. 2012).
What is missing in many stories is a tale of the consultative work of the special educator, special teacher or special pedagogue, also in some contexts called the SENCO (special education needs coordinator). The article by Takala, Wickam, Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Lundström hints at this. This professional should and could deliver information about all aspects of learning at school and promote both teaching and learning. The guidelines for this professional should be flexible. However, based on the results of the articles in the thematic section, a consultative and cooperative role is needed, and the content of special teacher education programmes needs to be critically chosen. One important area of this education is ‘interaction skills’. Interaction brings us back to the use and choice of words.

The choice of words is crucial, revealing and interesting. It can also be confusing and misleading as the following anecdote suggests:

A blind woman went into a grocery shop she was not familiar with to buy milk. When she heard someone walking nearby she made her choice of wording. She did not say: ‘Excuse me, I have learning difficulties. Can you please help me?’ Nor did she say: ‘Excuse me, I am a bit different. Can you help me?’ Instead, she said: ‘I am blind and can’t find the milk. Can you help me?’.

We hope the articles in this thematic section promote the right to learn for everyone, despite whatever kind of expressions are used to address the challenges in quality learning.

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