Examensarbete

Theory and practice of «special support» between system and individual.

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Abstract

The main purpose of this work is to analyse how teachers perceive and deal with diversity, where they put the limit between «normality» and «otherness», how they relate to the documentation proceeding from public institutions. Using an ethnographic methodology based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I shall apply Pierre Bourdieu's theories about social reproduction and distinction to a high school in Skåne, with the purpose of better understanding the difference between change and reconversion in dealing with «otherness» in the form of «learning disabilities».

This study aims at better understanding how «otherness», «diversity», and «plurality» are categorized, hierarchically organized, considered as «distortions», «defects», «syndromes» to be cured, when instead they could actually constitute means to overcome the ancestral «fear of the other», the rejection of «complexity» and to fill the perceived gap between theory and practice, between the «school of diversity and plurality» and the school of «kunskapsmål», «performance», «driven-ness», both present in the current Läroplan (LPF-94) and likely to be found in the new one.

Finally, this analysis tries to point at the necessity to question the unquestionable. That is, to question the values that are considered to be established for good and for everybody, understanding them as historical products, not as philosophical a priori. Far from being historical invariables, those values and principles are the result of actual political fights, even of revolutions, and of debates occurred for centuries or even millennia. School has been focusing on having them internalised and naturalised, instead of developing adequate instruments to let them be critically understood, reflected upon, talked about, and of course experienced in their many contexts.

The study's main result lies in individuating the structural and individual factors that allow the teachers to deal with «otherness» and «diversity» as a problem instead as a resource, underlining the symbolic violence implicit in the process of naturalisation of values and principles.
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Daniel Pennac's description of children radically convinced of their inability to learn or even understand the notions that school, in their experience, has unsuccessfully tried to teach them for a long time matches perfectly my first contact with students during my verksamhetförlagd tid (internship) in a Gymnasieskola (high school) in Skåne. These students showed a well established «passion for failure» and the firm belief that they «just can't do» whatever the teachers ask of them. The idea behind this study originates first of all from the contact with this context.

The observation of a context presented to me from the very beginning as «difficult», characterised by «weak» students often suffering from dyslexia, dyscalculia, ODD, ADHD or similar disorders, inspired me to investigate the reasons of these perceptions and of the way they were communicated to me, a newcomer and a candidate-teacher. Apparently, at the base of this perception, shared by many teachers as well as by many students¹, there was a certain variety of considerations about the (social and individual) causes of the «difficulties» experienced by the children as well as about the strategies to put a remedy to a situation perceived as negative.

As for the strategies to implement, there was a shared expectation on behalf of the informants for a school reform that would set clearer standards to their work. In general, apparently the focus oscillated from acknowledging individual biologically grounded limitations to putting the blame on difficult backgrounds or previously acquired educational gaps, on the lack of fundamental knowledge, and on the scarcity of resources. Anyway, there was the common perception of a deep, somewhat polarized, cultural «otherness», interpreted as one of the main causes of the «learning difficulties» or «disabilities» encountered by many students.

¹ I am here referring to the teachers and students - not constituting a sample - with whom I made contact, and whom I listened to, and observed during my VFT. For considerations on the sample see chapter 3.
Consequently, the purpose of this research is to understand how «diversity», «otherness» and «deviance» are perceived and dealt with at school by interviewing some of the teachers and analysing their answers. The analysis of the qualitative interviews, together with the study of the literature and the field-observation, are expected to produce a first approximate picture of how the teachers deal with «diversity», «otherness» and «difficulties».

Secondarily the purpose of this work is to understand how this analysis can support change, trying to correspond to a demand for school reform as strong as confusing and imprecisely put.

1.1 Purpose of the study and questions at issue.

This work aims to investigate how teachers - of different background\(^2\) and age - perceive and deal with «diversity» and «otherness» in the form of «learning difficulties» or «learning disabilities».

An approach to the definition of these terms and expressions will be developed in the theoretical background, as the result of a bibliographic exploration of the vast literature on the subject.

The questions at issue are:

- How do teachers perceive «otherness»\(^3\) at school?
- How do teachers identify and «separate» students «in need of special support»?
- How do teachers deal with «diversity»\(^4\) in their classroom?
- How do teachers relate to the official documents regarding support to students with/in «learning difficulties»?

The above questions deal on one level with teachers’ perceptions, with the theoretical tools they use to identify and (possibly) «separate» those students believed to be «in need of special support», and with the pedagogical tools activated in order to deal with «diversity» and «otherness» in the classroom, during the lessons. On another, somewhat different, level, the last question at issue means to investigate the perceived

\(^2\) Obviously, with the expression «different background» I mean to underline my awareness of the variety of pedagogical capitals and experiences which characterise the sample I selected.

\(^3\) «The quality of being different», not alike, distinct from that otherwise experienced or known. See Oxford Dictionary of English, Second Edition Revised.

gap between the teachers' daily work and the policies set by local and national institutions such as Skolverket or the city's Kommun.

The questions at issues of this work are therefore split in two areas: one «practical» framework, consisting of the way school and teachers perceive «diversity» and «treat» all forms of «otherness»; the second one is more concerned with investigating if (and if so, how) the theoretical values and norms that public policies try to enforce are received and interpreted by the teachers.

It is the intention of this work to connect these two levels on a common theoretical ground and to lay the foundations for further considerations on future school reforms.

I believe that the use of Foucault's ideas on the «limit» and Bourdieu's theories on the school as a reproductive system can help to better understand how to form strategies towards a school reform that would actually take into due consideration the needs - not so "special" but relevant nevertheless - of the teachers, without being perceived as an imposition enforced upon them.

Researchers as Hargreaves and Shirley has, in my personal opinion, suggested a somewhat believable approach to the problem of school reform in the near future⁵. In general, they underline the necessity of finding a balance between the need to control and evaluate on behalf of the State and the attribution of power and responsibility to each school and teacher.

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2. Theoretical background.

The set of problems investigated in this work is extremely wide and involves many disciplines. Studies on the problems of «diversity», its perception, and on the policies arranged in order to deal with it have been developed by psychiatrists, neuropsychiatrists, philosophers, neurologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, pedagogues. Nevertheless, a common theoretical ground can be established first of all by underlining the dialectic between individual agency and society, contingency and structure.

A first useful distinction, as noted by Mark Priestley, lies in the «long standing» contraposition between the individual and the social approach to disability theory. Within this dualism and with the intention to overcome it, Priestley identifies four positions:

1. Firstly, theories assuming the «impaired body» (as a biological organism) as object of the analysis. According to these theories, the impairment would be the outcome of an organic, determined, imperfection. This position, still politically and academically influent, is tied to medical and pharmaceutical research and does not actually deal with «disabilities» or «otherness», but only with the «defect», the «illness», the «impairment», which anyway would lie exclusively within the individual. Strong criticisms to this approach have come on a political, ethical, and theoretical ground.

2. A second position focuses mainly on «cognitive interaction and affective experience». The approaches that can be placed in this position use mainly a phenomenological methodology (Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl), symbolic

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interactionism (George H. Mead), and interpretative psychology (Erving Goffman), that is, «disabilities» would be a creation of individuals, willing - for example - to stigmatize or to be stigmatized9.

3. A third group of theories is characterized by the attention dedicated to material relations of power and physically disabling barriers (such as architectonical barriers) in defining «disabilities» as a result of work conditions, gender issues in social relations, poverty, within a specific historical context.

4. Finally, in a fourth position, disability is considered a social construct produced by specific (and relative) cultural conditions: there has always been people considered to be «different» or to bear the stigma of disability, but the limit between what is «normal» and what is «different» has shifted, producing apparently relevant - if not always consequent - transformations in the way «difference» and «otherness» were dealt with. Depending on the cultural context, then, «impairment» and «disability» can lead to segregation or to undifferentiated integration.

Although there are many factors identifying different forms of disability - type of impairment, class, gender, «race», sexuality - Priestley argues that there still remains «an essential level of commonality in the collective experience of discrimination and oppression»10. In this regard, then, «disability» may well be assimilated to «otherness» and «difficulty» in that they all produce and are produced by oppression and discrimination. On this ground, the researches of some sociologists, philosophers, and historians can be used to reduce the gap between the social and the individual approaches as sketched above.

Studies conducted by Reuven Feuerstein in a somewhat socio-cultural perspective demonstrated, among other things, how psychometric tests are unable to distinguish between «mentally retarded» children and educationally and socially neglected immigrant children.11 Years later he showed the existence of two sub-groups in «retarded performer»: the «culturally deprived» and the «culturally different» children.

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indicating respectively children with «low learning potential», lacking cultural mediation, and children whose problems originates in the cultural difference between their original culture and the Western culture\textsuperscript{12}. In both cases, anyway, the problem - the «learning difficulty» - can be tracked back to cultural mediation being only partially developed (in «culturally different» children) or almost completely absent (in «culturally deprived» children). It is therefore a matter of cognitive interaction tied to the context, although in the «culturally deprived» children's case not to a specific context.

And actually Lev Vygotsky's theories confirm, in a strictly pedagogical perspective, the importance of contexts and of interactions, underlining the «socio-cultural nature of special needs», the «question of "integration" or "mainstreaming"», and the «role of peer interaction for the special-needs child»\textsuperscript{13}.

Elaborated in the 1920s, Vygotsky's theories about the study and treatment of children «in need of special support» - generally known as «theory of disontogenesis» (theory of distorted development), constituting the theoretical base of «defectology» - are affected by an evolutionary and mechanistic perspective, but still some of the principles thereby enunciated are of extreme interests:

Any physical handicap [...] not only alters the child's relationship with the world, but above all affects his interaction with people. Any organic defect is revealed as a social abnormality in behaviour. It goes without saying that blindness and deafness per se are biological factors, however, teachers must deal not so much with these biological factors by themselves, but rather with their social consequences\textsuperscript{14}.

Individuals with non-organic, relatively mild learning difficulties were beyond the grasp of Russian defectology (and thus of Vygotsky's theories) until very recently\textsuperscript{15}. But still the focus was set on the «social consequences» and on «social interaction» as


defining factors of what Vygotsky called «abnormalities», both organic (biological) and social.

But who decides when a child is «different» and needs «special support»? How is the decision taken? Which «difficulties» are normal and which are not? How much of the social and cultural context of the child is known to the teachers and how has it come to their attention? Can a superficial classification of the child's contexts - for example the parents' level of education - produce a better understanding of the structures laying at the base of the separation between «normal» and «special»? What theoretical tools have been elaborated to study and analyse the Swedish context?

Putting together these questions and considerations with the fact that there is no general scientific consensus about how to determine the limits - or even the very existence - of many of the syndromes and disorders treated in special pedagogy, clearly suggests that further researching is in order.

2.1 Foucault's «medical gaze» and the archaeology of «otherness».

First of all, the postulated dualism between structure and (individual) agency can be (and has been) partially resolved in the «theory of practice» inspired by the works of Pierre Bourdieu and, secondarily, Anthony Giddens. Very succinctly, these authors suggest the existence of a complicated interaction between agency and social structures in which reciprocal influences are determinant. These approaches can be juxtaposed to the work of Michel Foucault, and particularly to the second edition of La naissance de la clinique (1972), to L'archéologie du savoir (1969), and to Dits et écrits (1994). The dualism between structure and (individual) agency, resolved by these scholars, reflects on the dualism, frequently found in the literature and empirically observed, between a theory and a practice of teaching to students «in need of special support».


Foucault's philosophical approach to the question of «otherness» consists in investigating the historical conditions that allows «sickness» and «madness» to become objects of knowledge, thus giving birth to scientific disciplines such as psychopathology and clinical medicine, and individuating specific places to «treat» - that is to culturally and socially deal with - those differences\(^{18}\). Clinical medicine would be constituted as a discipline not only by the knowledge regarding the functioning of human body, its physiology and pathological alterations, but also by other factors such as «political reflections, reform programs, legislative acts, administrative regulations, ethical considerations»\(^{19}\).

In Foucault's thought, all this constitutes the *episteme*, the unconscious and internalized knowledge specific of a certain historical period, which is the very condition for the possibility of *savoir* and knowledge itself, the only framework within which discourses can be produced in their epoch\(^{20}\). In this context the limit between «normality» and «otherness» would be established and thereafter reinforced by means of authoritative instruments, among them, the use of medical terminology and diagnosing. The birth of the «medical gaze», according to Foucault, would have produced the assertion of the normative value of health by means of a scientifically and biologically founded clinical medicine\(^{21}\). This is, very succinctly expressed, also the theoretical ground beneath Foucault's idea of *biopolitics*, that is, of the social and political control exerted upon all individuals by means of biology through the fundamental division between «normal» and «pathological», «normal» and «different».

In this perspective, the very introduction of «special pedagogy» as a discipline (or *techne*) would follow the trend of «standardisation» and «normalisation» by imposing - to a variable extent - a predetermined set of norms and values, thus deepening the perceived gap, instead of reducing it, between «normal» and «special» children. In other words, biology and medicine would be means to validate the polarity between «normal» and «pathological», «normal» and «different». The legitimating authority of medicine strengthens the connotative power of language, the power to actually create, by defining it, the object it describes: by classifying and scientifically defining all forms of

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\(^{19}\) Bertani (1998), p. 228.


«otherness» a narrower form of «normality» is established with all its segregating and discriminating potential. Public policies try to acknowledge social and cultural «diversity» while, at the same time, to a large extent, trying to "correct" and "discipline" them.

The idea of a «preventive medicine» seems to be an extreme manifestation of this episteme: the medical field broadens beyond the limits of sickness, disease and illness. Even the healthy body should be treated in order to «prevent» it to become sick. This implies an enormous increase in the amount and quality of social control enforced upon (and by) each individual. Being beautiful and in good shape has therefore become a social issue and an individual and collective responsibility. All must be always healthy. The limit between the perceived «health» and the perceived «anomaly» becomes more rigid and tied with economic, social, and cultural capital.

2.2 The pedagogical arbitrariness in Bourdieu's social theory.

According to Talcott Parsons' theories\(^ {22} \), conformity to «normal» social roles is a decisive factor in maintaining the integrity of social systems, and since «health» is a normative value, «disability» is to be seen as «deviance» and «social incapacity» to fulfil a «normal» role. Integration is thus possible only through fully assuming the role of «sick», «impaired», «handicapped» person, whom the society has to support and help\(^ {23} \). This approach is clearly pertinent and relevant in understanding under what social, material, and psychological conditions «special support» is required and activated.

Within this theoretical framework, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens investigate the relation between individual agency and social structure (as material and symbolic constructum). Both authors, although with some relevant differences, acknowledge the existence of a certain degree of conscious intention and reflexivity in the social actors. In Bourdieu, reflexivity does not inherently bear (nor indicates) transformation, even if it is a part of the formation of the habitus, while in Giddens it is


an essential and transformative part of social processes. These two approaches lead to
two partly different representations of society: in Bourdieu's case the focus ends up
being on continuities more than change, even if the latter is acknowledged as more than
a possibility. According to Bourdieu, anyway, often «reconversion» is mistaken for
change: reconversion is actually one of the transformative and adaptive instruments
producing social conservation and reproduction.

On the other hand, in Giddens' work, change, transformation, transition (recursive
as they may be) constitute one of the cores of social structuration, of the formation of
social structures. Yet in both authors, the ideas of social reproduction and reconversion
are central instruments of analysis.

In this context, Pierre Bourdieu describes the «arbitrariness» and «violence» of
any pedagogical action\textsuperscript{24} as a culturally oriented choice, produced by the political and
intellectual élites, imposing a certain hierarchy of values and behaviours, and
dissimulating the symbolic violence implicit in the process.

In exposing the social conditions of the «pedagogic action», characterized by
arbitrariness and symbolic violence, Bourdieu unveils the illusion du consensus, the
illusion of the neutrality and autonomy of school, which is at the very foundation of
school's specific contribution to social reproduction, as well as the internal contradiction
constituted by a «communication pedagogique» able to perpetuate itself «dans
l'inconscience heureuse de ceux qui s'y trouvent engagés»\textsuperscript{25} notwithstanding its
incapacity to fulfil its pedagogical purpose. Exceptions, stated Bourdieu, are functional,
not in contrast, to reproduction since they contribute to the legitimation of the system.

Moreover, in this perspective, the parents' cultural and economic capital - that is
the cultural, symbolic, and material resources, unequally distributed in society, and
transmitted in the form of voluntary and non-voluntary heritage - plays a decisive role
in the assessment of «diversity» and treatment of «otherness» at school: parents with

\textsuperscript{24} This is the very core of Bourdieu's research on the French school system. See Bourdieu, P. and
Passeron, J.-C. (1970), La reproduction. Éléments pour un théorie du système d'enseignement, Minuit,
Paris, p. 18-19. A somewhat radically different theory emerges from the studies of François Dubet, who
attributes more power and personality to individuals. See Dubet, F. (2004), L'école des chances: Qu'est-
cé qu'une école juste?, Seuil, Paris. In Dubet's words, the pedagogical arbitrariness is a «fiction
nécessaire» without which all pedagogical action would be impossible. Especially in his last years,
Bourdieu committed himself to showing that change - not mere reconversion - was possible only by means of
eliminating the illusion of a just school and by initiating a pedagogy of reflectivity and awareness.

\textsuperscript{25} «... in the happy unconsciousness of those who are committed to it [to the pedagogical
communication]». Ibidem, pp. 133-134.
privileged backgrounds are more likely to receive help in making disability claims for their children and to negotiate accommodations in the school and in the special education system.

The relevance of this approach in the study of «disability» and «special education» has not been deeply addressed by researchers in Sweden and abroad. Yet the intellectual challenges it poses are many and pertinent.

2.3 A glance at diversity in the Swedish context.

These considerations can be fruitfully applied to the Swedish context\textsuperscript{26}, on both local and national scale. A quick glance at the statistics provided by Skolverket confirms the general trend already shown in studies about other contexts in Europe and in North America. The statistic divides the student's population in three classes: students whose parents have pre-high school education (\textit{Förgymnasial utbildning})\textsuperscript{27}, students whose parents have high school education (\textit{Gymnasial utbildning}), and students whose parents have academic education (\textit{Eftergymnasial utbildning}). Within each class, the statistics show the percentage of students with grades in all subjects (\textit{andel elever med betyg i alla ämnen som ingått i elevens utbildning}), students who qualified for the high school national (and special) program at the end of the obligatory school (\textit{andel elever med slutbetyg från grundskolans år 9 vårterminen valt år som uppnådde behörighet till gymnasiesskolans nationella och specialutformade program}), students without grades in one subject (\textit{andel elever som saknade betyg i ett ämne}), and students without grades in two or more subjects (\textit{andel elever som saknade betyg i två eller flera ämnen, men inte i alla})\textsuperscript{28}.

Only 46% of the students whose parents have pre-high school education (SC1) received grades in all subjects, while students whose parents have high school (SC2) and academic (SC3) education show significantly higher figures (respectively 72% and 87%). The same trend shows up among the students who qualified for the high school national program - that is students who received passing (or better) grades in Swedish,

\textsuperscript{26} By «Swedish context» I mean essentially the Swedish school system, in its complexity and variety as well as in its legislative relative homogeneity. It is of course not possible to deepen the analysis of the context itself, not even limiting oneself to the problem of «otherness» and «diversity».

\textsuperscript{27} These students will be referred to respectively as SC1 (\textit{Förgymnasial utbildning}), SC2 (\textit{Gymnasial utbildning}), and SC3 (\textit{Eftergymnasial utbildning}).

\textsuperscript{28} See the attached document nr. 1. See also http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/1768/a/18064.
English, and Mathematics: 64% of the SC1 students qualified for the high school national program, while the percentage of SC2 and SC3 students is respectively 86% and 95%.

The data regarding students without grades in two or more subjects are even more revealing: 38% of the SC1 students did not obtain grades (not even IG) in two or more subjects, while the figures for SC2 and SC3 students drop to 18% and 7%.

These statistics confirm beyond any doubts the general trend mentioned above: the transmission of cultural and pedagogical capital has a decisive relevance in determining the students' performance.

The correlation between low performances and «need of special support» is well established in sociological and pedagogical research in Sweden and abroad: in general, the idea of «special support» is linked to the difficulty in fulfilling the educational goal. In the current Läroplaner (LPF-94 and LPO-94) there is no clear formulation of «special support», and yet it is clearly and repeatedly stated that it has to be given to students «with difficulties» (med svårigheter), that is students that experience difficulties in reaching the educational goals. The somewhat general (or vague) definition of the objectives leaves plenty of room to local initiative as well as to misunderstandings. A vague definition of the pedagogical goals is met by discontinuous approaches and evaluations of the students' «difficulties» or abilities to achieve the goals.

In her recently published thesis, Inger Asarsson claims that:

29 See Skolverket, p. 12 in both cases.
In other words, researches conducted in the Swedish context seem to confirm the general international trend towards a special pedagogy strongly influenced by the raising wave of categories created, as originally stated by Bourdieu, to adapt the current social hierarchy to the new «befolkningsgrupper som varken är exkluderade eller inkluderade». This strategy of naturalisation and normalisation of differences, enforced through a great variety of cultural and political means, deepens the perceived gap between theory and practice of the pedagogical action. Moreover, it spreads the idea of a cultural impossibility to actually deal with diversity and variety at school if not with the purpose to somehow negate them, enforcing the idea of «a school for all» in which «all are alike», at least to a certain degree.

As noted by Inger Asarsson, equality (likvärdighet) of all students is a rhetorical expression in need to be problematized and analysed in its complexity, especially when it is put in relation with the students' background, socialisation, and general conditions. The political trust in the capacity of the educational system to bridge contradictions and achieve social change produces in many teachers a widespread feeling of frustration and a sense of hopelessness of the goal.

Actually, in Swedish literature a lot of attention has been dedicated to special pedagogy and to school policies adopted in order to achieve the goal of a «school for all», a school which would grant the same right to education to all students. Less attention has been dedicated, at least until recently, to analyse the intellectual and cultural framework in which «otherness» is formed as ground upon which establishing the very «need of special support». This is one of the hypotheses drawn, in particular, by Joakim Isaksson in his work on Spänningen mellan normalitet och avvikelse.


34 Apart from the work of Joakim Isaksson, see also Aretun (2007), Barns "växa vilt" och vuxnas vilja att forma. Formell och informell socialisation i en muslimsk skola, Linköping Studies in Arts and Science
Inclusive schooling has long since being perceived as a correct implementation of special pedagogy. In the Swedish context inclusive schooling became an important pedagogical issue in the early 1970s, when a previously adopted strategy of separation was abandoned in favour of policy of integration and inclusion. An important role was played in this regard by the so-called SIA-utredningen (SOU 1974: 53). This trend in school policies continued during the 1990s, when the inclination to separate students «in need of special support» from the others was actively opposed with the purpose to improve and enforce «integration» (or «inclusion»): «special support» - still perceived as necessary - was to be provided to the child within the class to which he/she belonged. Partially contradicting this principle, stated in kap. 5, §5 of the obligatory school regulation (Grundskoleförordning), in §4 the legislator claims that «Stödupptäckning kan anordnas antingen i stället för utbildning enligt timplanen eller som ett komplement till sådan utbildning».

Despite the fact that, «I Lärarutbildningskommitténs betänkande (SOU 1999:63) poängteras att specialpedagogik fyller en viktig funktion, inte i första hand som någon särskild pedagogik för vissa elever, utan genom att bidra till att den naturliga variationen av elevers olikheter kan mötas i skolan», nowadays, as noted by Ahlberg, «den särskiljning som fått näring i 1940-talets differentieringspedagogik står fortfarande stark. Specialklasserna har successivt avvecklats, men under 1990-talet kunde man se en återgång till att skapa särskilda undervisningsgrupper».

No. 399, Linköping; Runfors, A. (2003), Mångfald, motsägelser och marginaliseringar. En studie av hur invandrarskap formas i skolan, Norsteds Akademiska Förlag, Stockholm.

35 It is already so in Montessori’s methodology and particularly in using «mixed age» groups and in the concept of «supportive classroom community». See Genovesi, G. (2006), Storia della scuola in Italia dal Settecento a oggi, Laterza, Roma-Bari.


37 The importance of this report has been underlined in the work of Ann Ahlberg (p. 86). «I Utredningen om skolans inre arbete (SIA-utredningen; SOU 1974:53) presenterades jämförande studier mellan specialklasser och vanliga klasser. Dessa studier visade att specialklasserna inte haft de positiva effekter som man hade förväntat sig, vilket ledde till en delvis förändrad syn på elever i behov av särskilt stöd».


40 Ahlberg, (2007), pp. 85-86. Even in this case, the choice of this particular report - out of the many published - derives from Ann Ahlberg’s research.

Despite relatively important changes in terminology and supposedly in policies, the adoption of a Bourdieuian perspective would seem to suggest that the *episteme* has not changed in any relevant way at least since the early XX century, given that the terminological transformations did not succeed in producing an equally relevant change in school practice. Conceived as it may be beneath a veil of courtesy, the barrier between «begåvade» and «obegåvade» children seems to be still perceived at a political, theoretical and practical level\(^{42}\).

\(^{42}\) This is one of the conclusions of the works already quoted above of Isaksson, J. (2009), *Spänningen mellan normalitet och avvikelse. Om skolans insatser för elever i behov av särskilt stöd*, Print & Media, Umeå; and Bartholdsson, Å. (2008), *Den vänliga maktutövningens regim. Om normalitet och makt i skolan*, Liber, Stockholm.

Having to deal with a complex set of questions connected to individual perceptions and to social structures I chose to adopt a case study explorative strategy, which in my opinion is best suited to bridge the gap between a pure phenomenological approach and pure structuralism. Concretely, the case I chose to delimit is constituted by the teachers working in a high school (yrkesförberedande gymnasieskola) in the Southern area of a small city in Skåne, Cosifantutti School.

Cosifantutti School has about 1400 students and it is located in the industrial area of a city characterized by a clear distinction between the industrial and high-density area and the richer and smaller, historical and low-density residential area. The School building can be dated back to the XVIII century. The school is generally well organized and there seems to be good collaboration between teachers.

I also chose to attribute fictional names to the teachers I interviewed in order to protect their privacy.

The questions that emerged from the theoretical background and from the prolonged contact with the subject of study, as well as from my own cultural background, deal with the teachers' perceptions and with their work at school with students and colleagues: on one hand, how «diversity» and «otherness» are perceived, identified, and delimited at school; on the other hand, how do teachers deal with «diversity» and with the official rules and norms that supposedly direct their work. I therefore chose to use qualitative tools such as participant semi-structured observation, field-notes, open conversations and semi-structured interviews. There was always a clear focus on the concepts of «normality», «otherness», and «diversity», as well as on individuating the limit between «normal» and «in need of special support» children.

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43 In this line I put together the works of Bourdieu and Giddens as attempts to theoretically overcome the limits of structuralism and phenomenology. Both authors acknowledged that the phenomenological approach would ignore the constraining power of social structures, focusing on the individual and on the process by which he/she attributes meaning to the world. In a pure socio-phenomenological approach (see, for example, the works of Harold Garfinkel) each individual shapes the world by interpreting it.


The peculiarity of my position as candidate-teacher and my status of immigrant has been taken into the due consideration, both during the observation and in the process of preparing and driving the interviews. Considering the duration of the analysis and the gradual integration, other potentially relevant factors, such as my cultural background, my gender, and my age, have shown not to be of great (or excessive) importance.

All considered, the method I use can be defined as «ethnographic» in being aimed to a contextualized, broad, participant-eyed description of the subject, similarly to Geertz's «thick description»46, with a reduced set of pre-determined hypotheses, presented at the beginning of this work.

3.1 Observation.

Observation happened during a period of 6-7 weeks, largely coinciding with my internship, and took place during the lessons in the classrooms, as well as during informal (lunch, coffee-break) and formal (arbetslag) meetings. The questions forming the main structure of the observation were:

- How does each teacher perceive «diversity» at school?
- How does each teacher identify and «separate» students «in need of special support»? That is, how does each teacher deal theoretically - as an individual and as a member of the school community - with «diversity» and «otherness»?
- How does each teacher deal practically with «diversity» and «otherness» in his/her classroom?
- How does each teacher relate to the official documents regarding support to children with/in «learning difficulties»?

I therefore chose to observe:

- The positioning of the teacher in relation to the class and the students, and the students' positioning and the teacher possible reaction.

- The teacher's acquaintance to each student (the ability to remember each student's name and some characteristics).
- The individual and social dynamics within the class during different pedagogical moments (frontal lesson, group work, exercise, debate) and the results of each of these moments on separation and inclusion interactions.
- The teacher's reaction to different degrees of participation to the lesson.
- The teacher's reaction (during and after the lesson) to mild, moderate, and extreme disturbance on behalf of one or more students.
- What kind of participation was rewarded (and how) or sanctioned (and how).
- What kind of control was the teacher trying to achieve.
- How the teacher reported his/her experience in informal and formal meetings with colleagues.

In other words, this kind of observation included a somewhat active participation in the life of the subject group and the development of personal relations with the individuals involved. Despite the extremely short and fragmented period of time dedicated to participant observation, I believe that the participant observation (also in the form of informal conversation) developed in a very fruitful and frank way, partly thanks to my perceived status of migrant, which often induced particularly detailed explanations of normative behaviours.47

During the observations, more considerations not directly inserted in the established structure, arose. They were usually noted on notebooks and, when pertinent, taken into account.

3.2 Interviews with the teachers.
The interviews with the teachers were semi-structured, that is flexible and open: there was a core of previously prepared questions, but other questions could - and generally would - be posed as a result of given answers.

The structure was thought choosing not to acknowledge existing differences in age, gender, seniority, and taught subject. The interviewed teachers were between 35 and 63 years old, 5 men and 4 women, teaching all core subjects (kärnämnen) but one. Two of them had recently entered the profession (<5 years as fulltime teachers), five had been teachers for a longer period (6-19 years), and two were close to retirement (20+ years). Considering that I was trying to ascertain how «diversity» was dealt with, I wanted to select a sample as representative as possible of the teachers' population, at least basing my selection on purely empirical and direct assumptions, since I could not retrieve any statistical data about the school personnel.

All interviews began with a few words about privacy and secrecy, and then had four introductory questions in common, two of them regarding the teacher's background. I tried to set a relaxed and somewhat informal atmosphere, while at the same time the choice of words and the use of language were somewhat technical. Some questions were posed as if the interviewer were asking for advice, thus inspiring the teacher to assume a more open, and possibly straightforward, attitude.

The interviews lasted about 45-60 minutes and always took place privately, without anyone else listening.

3.3 Presentation of the informants (interviewed teachers).

In this work, all the interviewed teachers have been given fictional names to protect their privacy.

Karin - is an experienced teacher, close to retirement, with a very broad attitude and with a passion for special pedagogy.

Sven - has been a teacher for many years and is close to retirement. He has many interests and has been working at Cosifantutti School for a long time.

Kalle - is a middle-aged man and he has had other professional experiences not related to school and education.

Gunilla - is an experienced teacher, close to retirement, committed and formal. She has worked in different schools too.

Nils - is a middle-aged man, who has been working many years at Cosifantutti School, as a teacher and with administrative duties. He's very engaged and enjoys contact with younger colleagues.
Oskar - is a teacher with some experience. He has been working at Cosifantutti during his whole career as full-time hired teacher.

Malin - is a teacher with some experience who enjoys taking responsibilities and committing herself to her job. She is determined to teach all she can to her students.

Gustav - is a young teacher, only recently full-time employed at Cosifantutti. He feels strong motivation to his job as teacher.

Elin - is a young teacher, only recently full-time employed. She has been working as temporary teacher in other schools, but the experience at Cosifantutti is her first as full-time teacher.

Agnes - is a teacher with some experience. Despite the fact that she's been working for some years, she has only recently been full-time employed at Cosifantutti. She is relaxed and engaged in her job.

3.4 Field's description.

The school where this work took place is located in a city in Skåne, more specifically in an industrial area, south of the central station\[^{48}\]. It is an area presented to me and generally known as a «working class» area, distinguished by the northern part of the city. The main building of the school is a former military quarter, adapted to function as a school.

The main building hosts almost all the classrooms for theoretical lessons, the staff room, the library, a few computer halls, the cafeteria, the mess room, some laboratories, the rooms for «special pedagogy», and the administrative wing.

The classrooms are somewhat properly dimensioned for a group up to 20-25 students, have large windows, hangers on the opposite side, a big whiteboard, a closet containing books, and some electronic devices (TV, VHS and DVD player, CD player). The desks are usually arranged in a «U» shape, with the teaching post on top.

The room for the school personnel is actually a series of rooms, some of them reserved to the teachers, while others contain photocopy machines and computers. A big adjacent hall is destined to coffee breaks, lunch, and formal and informal meetings.

The school has been described to me from the very beginning as characterized by a high percentage of immigrants, by low-grades, «weak», and «impaired» students, and by a high level of penetration of the ideology of the political party *Sverigedemokraterna*.\(^{49}\)

My direct and participant observation confirms these affirmations only partially. The school seems to have many students with *invandrare*-background, but this stigmatisation is only partially shared by the students themselves and appears, anyway, to be extremely nuanced: labels «blattar» or «svennar» were frequently used without negative or insulting meaning, although, of course, they retained all of their segregating power. Much stronger stigmatisation was laid upon gender («bitch»\(^{50}\)) and sexuality («bög» and «flåta»), and to a less ostensible degree to the economical situation (especially regarding jeans, shoes, cell-phones, and cars).

Attendance to lessons was very variable, depending on many factors. Low attendance had generally a notable impact on the teacher's performance.

According to the school principal (*Gymnasiechef*), about 40% of the full-time teachers are somewhat close to retirement (5 to 8 years or less). In lack of statistics, I observed that the percentage seems to be correct.

**3.5 Implementation and ethical questions.**

The observation began during my second internship and continued for a period of 6-7 weeks. The interviews took place during the same period too. I had previously informed some of the informants of my work, and I contacted and informed the others while already in place. In any case, the informants were informed that the interviews were voluntary and that all data gathered would have been anonymous.

During the lessons, observation was always opened with a short introduction to the students about my presence as «observer». I took a lateral position, but often wandered about during the lesson, sometimes sitting elsewhere. During the observation I took extended notes.

Other observations were developed in different areas of the school and were not related to pedagogical moments. They were purely ethnographic observations and

\(^{49}\) See the attached table 1. Source: http://www2.ungdomsstyrelsen.se:8080/skolval2010/resultat.jsp.

\(^{50}\) During my observation, this expression was produced only by boys when referring to girls, and only therefore may it be related to gender.
therefore did not require a fully informed participation on behalf of all the observed subjects.

The nine interviews took place in various places and times of the workday, usually whenever the teacher had some free time to spare. During the interviews I took extensive notes recording the answers as well as my personal considerations. Some questions, apparently leading astray from the established structure, were actually meant to form an empathic atmosphere thus facilitating an open attitude.

Given my poor knowledge of the Swedish language I checked my notes (and in a few cases, some excerpts of the recorded interview) with the teachers, in order to verify my correct linguistic understanding. The interpretation of the data is, of course, subjective.
4. Analysis.

I believe the words of Luigi Pintor, a former anti-fascist fighter and writer, can properly express, in the language of literature, how «otherness» is perceived and culturally dealt with:

More than anything else the condition of being sick shows that the world is split in two. Being sick means separation and loneliness. Kind people may feel compassion, others may experience some kind of discomfort, others a slight irritation or even anger. All of them, anyway, send out the very same signal of detachment and distance. They reassure themselves and they communicate to the others that the disease is an exceptional and alien condition, like old age, not a shared and common destiny. Thus the disease, not being recognized as a part of life, becomes horribly painful and incurable.\(^5\)

In this chapter I shall try to analyse the data emerged from the observations and the interviews with the teachers and therefore to revise how «diversity» is perceived, and «otherness» is identified and dealt with. Since the set of problems is quite broad and presents, in the light of the previously articulated theories, a certain theoretical complexity, I shall divide the chapter in three paragraphs, with the intent to meet the questions at issue.

4.1 Perceiving «diversity» and identifying «otherness»: the teachers' perspective as emerged from the interviews.

The theoretical background has shown how, on behalf of many researchers, school has been seen as a conservative force, an instrument of social «reproduction», a field where socialisation is - more or less willingly and knowingly - aimed at preserving and enforcing the established set of legitimate values and norms, and the inherent social hierarchy. Even the somewhat optimistic work of Hargreaves and Shirley points out how «it is teachers' performance at raising scores, a system characterized by "set expectations", and a language of delivery and "driven-ness" that dominates» the public discourse - and policies - about school.\(^5\) In this context, all alternative forms of behaving, performing, and communicating are regarded as forms of «otherness», constituting «diversity».

What are the teachers' perceptions regarding this «diversity» and the idea of «otherness» embedded in it? In other words, how do the teachers perceive «diversity»

\(^5\) Pintor, L. (1991), Servubo, Einaudi, Torino, p. 84.

\(^5\) Hargreaves, The Fourth Way, p. 25. The authors refer to the McKinsey & Company's arguments in their report's conclusions.
and how do they identify - and interpret - the «otherness» of which this diversity in constituted?

The analysis of the teachers' answers has allowed the identification of a number of general trends, useful at the purpose to locate difference and to understand the mutual influence and the relations between social order and social values.

1. A first trend has been identified in the somewhat banal dichotomy between «we» and the «others», in being «we» a variable set of qualities constituting an imagined Swedish identity⁵³. On one hand, the category of «national» identifies «we» as «Swedish» individuals, therefore as the bearer of "a" shared and historically stratified culture. On one occasion, for example, Sven noted that «they [migrants] can be just as good as we are … sometimes even better. But it takes much more commitment on their behalf». And Karin noted that «we [teachers] must help them [migrants] to integrate themselves in our society. They have to learn the basic skills to adapt to the Swedish society». The category of «the others» would in this case be represented by the immigrants (invandrare) as bearer of "different" cultures. During the interview, when problematized, the complexity and arbitrariness of the concept of immigrant showed to be apparent to all teachers but two, namely Sven and Kalle, who thought the category was a perfectly legitimate one. In all other cases, nevertheless, the category was still in place and reappeared when the focus was shifted. This conclusion seems to agree with already established observations on the formation of a category of «migrant» in which a great variety of individuals, including some who were actually born in Sweden, would be placed, following diverse lines of thought⁵⁴. On two occasions, while talking about cheating (att fuska) with homework, the interviewed teachers (Gunilla and Kalle) claimed that it is a practice considered unacceptable in Sweden, something «we don't do» (Gunilla), while in other cultures it was a perfectly legitimate behaviour.

2. A similar line of thought is shown regarding religious identity, used almost as a substitute of national identity, particularly in considering Islam as a homogeneous and unitary religious culture. A question regarding the use of hijab and niqab immediately

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showed a quite high awareness of the plurality of Islam as well as a general respect for this perceived «otherness». But still, in a general argument, Islam would be represented as a standardized and undifferentiated body, identified by its own «otherness» in a number of specific issues: the most relevant differences would reside in «the way "they" treat women», in a somewhat general «lack of tolerance», and in a different approach to religion, suffering from a lower penetration of the scientific (Western) thought. One of the teachers, for instance Gustav, argued that «they [Palestinians? Muslims?] have a different concept of tolerance» and that they may be more «culturally incline to violence». This consideration was made right after a lesson in which a student with Palestinian origins refused to acknowledge the viability of any solution for the political tension in the Middle-East different from the complete extermination of all «Jews». In this case, the challenge posed by the student's statement produced an emotional response "translated" on a rational level by means of the generalisations culturally available to the teacher (in this case, Gustav). In different contexts, I observed similar reactions on behalf of other teachers.

3. A third trend can be summarized in the process of naturalisation of the social and cultural inequalities. The perceived disadvantage of a child - «culturally deprived», «culturally different» or «impaired» - would be connected and reduced to a «natural condition», being that of being male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, native/migrant, or of coming from a difficult/privileged background. This process of naturalisation of inequality is clearly (and mainly) connected to ethnicity, class, and health, and it occurs without the teachers being aware of it. Referring to a visit to a museum during which he had to deal with the complete lack of interest displayed by many students, Sven said «it is their families! They were never taken to a museum, of course they do not understand it». In other cases, for instance in Nils', Malin's and Gustav's, this trend was on occasions connected to an economically privileged context, which would have caused «too much TV and games» and «not enough culture».

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56 The above mentioned quotations refer to phrases noted during observations. In all cases, the informants were referring to students experiencing learning difficulties or generally showing lack of interest towards school.
4. Gender differences are acknowledged as constituting factors of «diversity» following two different lines: on one hand, girls' behaviour is often believed to show more maturity in comparison with the boys', on the other hand, in different ways, girls are stigmatized as superficial and passive, while boys would be more active (if undisciplined). This trend does not seem to derive from gender distinctions among the teachers. It is instead possible that the teachers' age may have some relevance in determining this attitude. No conclusive formulation is obtainable from the information gathered and with the chosen sample. It should be noted that not in all classes were both genders represented. Karin agreed that girls are naturally more docile and that the ones needing more attention were the boys. Sven, on the other hand, told me directly that girls are often «more superficial», many of them being «weak dolls» («svaga dockor»). Although others did not explicitly pronounce such generalizing and violent statement, differentiation and classification based on gender was there.

5. One of the main focuses in identifying «otherness» is related to the perceived will (or lack of such) to acquire the established knowledge (kunskap) and skills (färdighet) in order for the children to be able to take care of themselves, find a job, work with others, and be good citizens. In other words «otherness» is measured on the ability to achieve integration and accept and obey the rules. The students who will not or cannot learn these skills and knowledge in the forms transmitted by the teachers are generally considered to be «difficult» or «in need of special support», that is, affected by a neurological or psychological syndrome and «sick» with ODD or ADHD. In this case, all the interviewed teachers believed that special pedagogy should, in principle, be activated. In my opinion, the philosophical ground of this trend lies in the shared belief in certain rules (typically those stated in the Läroplan, although with some discrepancies) and in their universal and unquestionable value.

Principles such as «appreciation for each individual's values» («aktningen för varje människas egenvärde»), «non-confessional teaching», and the necessity to actively work against all forms of harassment or offence («trakasserier och annan kränkande behandling ska aktivt motverkas») are just universally accepted as general principles,

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58 All the informants showed no doubt about this particular point: a certain behaviour is associated to social disabilities or psychological syndromes.
but they are also experienced in a great variety of intensities by many individuals. Their repetition without openly acknowledging the variety of individual experiences entails constriction and arbitrariness. For example, a student rebelling against a formal definition of democracy, one he has not experienced, is expressing in a non-democratic form a democratic right, the right to protest, therefore posing one of the most radical challenges to the current form of democracy.

The mere repetition of the principle, followed by "special" pedagogical actions (åtgärd), or punishment does not suffice. It implies a hierarchic and authoritarian view of the pedagogical action, as well as a general consideration of the children as passive receivers of knowledge and skills in the form of rules and norms to be internalised in order to become a good citizen. Actually, during the interviews, the unquestionable value of certain rules (democracy, liberty, tolerance, mutual respect) was always clearly stated and defined as non-negotiable: «it's just something all have to learn»\(^{59}\). Moreover, the students' capacity to obey these rules has shown to determine the amount of liberty and participation they would be entitled to: the more obedience shown, the more liberty conceded. Failing to observe those apparently basic rules would result in various forms of pedagogical sanctions. Later on, during the participant observation, I saw, for example, teachers administering sanctions in the form of condescending behaviour - Elin: «visst är det så» - or mild derision - Malin: «ah! Men vad du är duktig!» - characterized by a certain level of sarcasm; even sanctions in the form of reproaches, from the completely ineffective «Sh! Tyst nu!» to more elaborated expressions.

In general, the interviews revealed the trend to perceive «diversity» as a difficulty and a problem, not a resource. While, with two exceptions (Agnes and Nils), «otherness» and «difference» are apparently accepted, not rejected, great relevance is still attributed to taking away all elements which could reveal them. Normalisation and naturalisation of inequalities are continuously enforced, first of all on the teachers themselves, who are unable to acknowledge these processes and see any alternative to the present form of their pedagogical action. A lack of alternative results in a decreased level of flexibility and liberty in the planning of lessons.

Some teachers claimed that a constant strive to achieve and maintain control was necessary and preliminary to the pedagogical action. The teacher's ability to enforce  

\(^{59}\) In the words of Malin. Similar statements were made by all other teachers, although in partly different contexts.
control was rarely linked to repressive or even oppressive pedagogy, as proposed in Michel Foucault's and Paulo Freire's theories\(^\text{60}\).

In a socio-cultural perspective, the very ability to learn depends on the positive interaction between the learner, seen as an active and participant individual, and the context, which has to be intelligible and relatable to the learner's own experience and knowledge in order to produce creative and original learning\(^\text{61}\). Therefore, imposing one common curriculum (and one unquestionable set of rules) to an extremely heterogeneous group of individuals constitutes *per se* a radical negation of diversity and of all forms of «otherness», which is, in essence, the core of the process of normalisation. This would not necessarily represent a problem. The point is to acknowledge that negating «diversity», working at normalisation, and pursuing naturalisation of inequalities is a way to enforce social reproduction and conservation. Which contradicts openly - and this is a problem - what is stated in the official documents as the main goal of education and school. In this lies one of the perceived gaps between theory and practice\(^\text{62}\).

In Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, this phenomenon is the result of neo-liberal policies and ideologies assimilating liberty and individualism, solidarity and paternalism. The ways «diversity» is perceived and «otherness» identified would suggest the persistence of the *episteme* inherent to this neo-liberal ideology and to its ramifications.

All interviewed teachers underlined the importance of the *läroplan* (LPF: 94) in providing the fundamental values to inspire the pedagogical action and to define the school's purpose.

All of the interviewed teachers, with the exception of Kalle, were clearly aware of the complexity of the task to work as cultural mediator in the multicultural school. At least six of them related «diversity» to individualising the pedagogical action, but at the

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same time all the teachers emphasized the fact that they were expected to «achieve the goal» (Gustav, Elin, Agnes, and Malin) of giving the children the knowledge and skills they are supposed to learn, the knowledge and skills to get integrated in the Swedish society (Oskar, Nils, Gunilla).

The principle stated in the lärplan (p. 4) according to which «det är inte tillräckligt att i undervisningen förmedla kunskap om grundläggande demokratiska värden. Undervisningen ska bedrivas i demokratiska arbetsformer och utveckla elevernas förmåga och vilja att ta personligt ansvar och aktivt deltaga i samhällslivet»

initially claimed to be of fundamental importance, was - at a better analysis - considered to be almost unrealistic or anyway extremely difficult to achieve. According to the teachers, this difficulty would have two main causes: on one hand it would be the result of a lack of will to learn on behalf of the students; on the other hand, it would indicate the failure of families and parents in supporting the development of elementary social skills. On a note of colour, one may underline how that very same remark is often addressed to the teachers by the parents.

In a similar way, the idea of allowing the highest degree of participation and influence to the children during the lesson was considered of secondary importance in comparison to achieving the «kunskapsmål» and help them to overcome what was perceived as their inexperience and incompetence (for example linguistic). All teachers seemed to agree that the students' rights were absolutely granted and protected and that the problem was to teach them they had obligations («skyldigheter») too. Among these obligations, there was, to a variable extent, also the controversial passage in the lärplan claiming that «i överensstämmelse med den etik som förvaltats av kristen tradition och västerländsk humanism sker detta genom individens fostran till rättsskänsla, generositet, tolerans och ansvarstagande» (p. 3). All teachers declared to consider this particular passage not properly expressed or even partly contradictory, but still necessary to produce integration. In my opinion the segregating power of this passage lies first of all in the implicit claim that «sense of justice, generosity, tolerance, and responsibility» are somehow embedded in the Swedish/Western culture, implying that this is not the case of «other» cultures. It creates the false illusion that those principles are not to be found in other cultures. It is, in other words, extremely ethnocentric.
4.2 Dealing with «diversity» in the classroom.

«Ce qui domine dans toute altération, c'est la persistance de la matière ancienne».


Marc Auge's words introduce perfectly a few preliminary considerations before deepening the analysis of the observations: «that which dominates in all alterations is the persistence of the ancient matter». Assertive as it may sound, this is not only a philosophical statement. It matches the effort to reconcile the role of structure and individual agency, an effort which constitutes the ground to all form of post-structuralistic analysis, being motivated by one general finding: despite the fact that «complexity» has become an altogether recognized concept (it suffices to say that plurality, in the form of the prefix «multi-» has spread in all discourses), in most sciences the acceptance of «diversity» as a positive factor and a value as well as an inherent characteristic of reality, is far from being achieved.

That being said, during my participant observations I focused on trying to understand how the teachers dealt with this irreducible «diversity» and what connotes the teachers' pedagogical action before different kinds - and graduations - of «otherness».

One of the first processes that I observed on behalf of the teachers is the unaware classification of various forms of «otherness» and «difficulties»: as a part of the conceptualization of the classroom, each teacher produces a form of taxonomy, a classification of the students arranged in a hierarchical configuration, a «système de différences»\(^{63}\). This classification corresponds to one of the means of domination, namely to «the principle of division», in ensuring recognition of an object (for example gender, class, health or national differences) without implying knowledge and awareness of the distinctive features which define it. Moreover, this classification is based first of all on the *habitus* of the teacher and is only partly influenced by contingency. Apart from the more obvious category of gender, I found other *taxa* to be of extreme importance: the ability or will to perform, to participate, to engage oneself in discussions, and to be disciplined, to follow the rules. Social roles are constructed

through interaction in all groups, but in a classroom, the influence of the teacher plays a decisive role: a relevant part of the normative values laying behind discriminating (or even violent) behaviours may come from the teacher, more or less inadvertently. Studies on bullying have demonstrated that, in addition to peer interactions, the teachers' attitude and behaviour can strongly influence - or even determine - the emergence of discrimination\(^{64}\).

As a result of this taxonomy, students are conceptually organized in units and dealt with according to a very limited set of strategies.

On one hand, the "best" students, definable as «active», «intelligent», «disciplined», and «participative», are often left aside and their performance is verbally rewarded and acknowledged, although with little emphasis, and then not followed by appropriate actions. This strengthens the perception of «difference» and «otherness», especially on behalf of those students who do not perform as "successfully". I observed this behaviour continuously. In one of Kalle's lections, for example, the only student able to solve a determined problem was politely invited to wait and let «the others» try as well. In Sven's lessons, the most active students were acknowledged publicly as «duktiga» and «knowing all the answers»\(^{65}\).

On the other hand, I observed that less-performing students imply a wider variety of responses on behalf of the teachers, according to the sub-class they are assigned to. I observed these sub-classes to be analytically individuated as follow:

1. The mildly physically impaired (sight problems, partial deafness).
2. The «invisibles», very shy, non-participative, passive children.
3. The «restless» and the «jesters», defined by harmless disruptive behaviours (on occasion informally diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder).
4. The «rebels», defined by defying and disrespectful behaviours (on occasion informally diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder).

\(^{64}\) See for example the classic Olweus, D. (1993), *Bullying at school*, Blackwell, Malden, in particular p. 46. Olweus' approach is anyway mainly on the implementation of methods set to stop the deviant behaviour when it has already become manifest. Not enough attention is paid on what I would define, in the lack of acquaintance with specific literature, «polite bullying», the expression of silent or even gentle contempt, being a form of symbolic, not physical, violence.

\(^{65}\) In this particular case, I observed sarcasm on behalf of some other students towards the «good ones». 
The teachers' behaviour I have observed towards students placed in the first two categories (mildly impaired and "invisibles") varies from mild condescension toeasy rewarding: the general attitude is influenced by the assessment that «there is not much we can do for them», as well as by the observation that «they actually try to do their best». This perception results often in a practice of "lowering the bar" for some or all students. I also observed that this attitude often results in further loss of concentration and motivation, diminished attention and participation.

The «jesters» and «restless» are met by a broader variety of behaviours. Often the «jester» would be met by a mild reproach or even a light sanction. In some cases, the teacher participated to the jokes, got involved in them and actually used them to turn the attention of the whole classroom on the studied topic. This "complicity" strategy seems to produce positive effects on the attention and participation of the students. I have never observed it to degenerate into anarchy, especially since the distracting activity is not allowed for more than a few minutes. In case this behaviour on behalf of the student is matched by a poor performance in tests, it is usually interpreted as a sign of a deeper problem. But the problem would lie entirely within the child, not in the pedagogical action: «it works for all the others... the problem is with that child then», is a common response I have listened. This interpretation may eventually lead to a «special pedagogy» effort, often in the form of åtgärdsprogram.

The rebels, being a not-so-uncommon category in my internship school, are dealt with apparently contradictory behaviours. Depending on certain factors (gender, physical characteristics, ethnicity, known episodes in the past) the teachers' behaviour may vary relevantly. At first, defying and disrespectful behaviours are sanctioned with short sharp reprimand. If the behaviours continue, there is often an interval during which no action is taken. On occasions, an attempt to establish discipline can be led by other students unwilling to accept the disruption. In a third stage, reached only on one occasion during my observations, a further attempt to return to discipline has been started by the teacher by isolating the disrupting student. On many occasions, the escalation of disruptive situations is ignored and its containment is left to the students themselves, with somewhat inconsistent results.

In all these stages of disruptive interaction, I observed that very little or no effort whatsoever was set to understand what was actually causing the «deviant behaviour», or
rather to understand the context in which the disruptive interaction was formed. According to socio-cultural theories, in fact, when dealing with perceived «otherness» attention should not be placed on exterior representations or "symptoms" of social and individual behaviour: these symptoms speak often only of the habitus of the person noticing them. More attention should instead be paid to the interactions between social agents and to the context in which they occur. 

In general, I observed the focus to be on maintaining authority and discipline and in transmitting notions.

In all the analytical cases described above, «diversity» - «the state of being diverse», that is «diverseness», «noticeable heterogeneity» - is not acknowledged nor actually considered as a pedagogic resource. Instead, in this regard, it is usually ignored and implicitly normalised. «Otherness», on the other hand, is taxonomically defined, allowing the materialization of «diversity» within the classroom, but not as a resource. I never observed a teacher asking, for example, to one of the perceived «others» to share his/her pedagogical capital and thus to ascertain (and reflect on) the qualities of the perceived «otherness» (or «identity»), question its validity as epistemological instrument, as category of thought. Another example: linguistic «otherness», although clearly individuated by the teachers in the form of proper/improper use of the language, poor vocabulary, and repetition of slang or idiomatic formulas («liksom», «skit», «fan»), is usually ignored: it is very seldom hindered, never acknowledged and critically examined. Terms as «svennehora», «blatte» 67, «bög» were always ignored, unless their use would be purposely directed against another student. Even in that case, a short and

66 See Ong-Dean, C. (2009), Distinguishing Disability. Parents, Privilege, and Special Education, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 162. An assessment of the social and cultural context in which each individual participates, leading to study disruptive occurrences not as symptoms of a individual disorder, but as the results of complex interactions would have been in order. It is a generally accepted opinion among neuropsychiatrists and psychologists that individual and context can hardly be studied separately. Gregory Bateson was among the first to make important steps towards a meta-analysis of neurological disorders, see Bateson, G. (1972), Steps to an ecology of mind, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. About the scientific reliability of syndromes such as dyslexia and ADHD see Elliott, J. G. and Gibbs, S. (2008), Does dyslexia exist?; in «Journal of Philosophy of Education», vol. 42, n. 3-4, 2008 and Barkley, R. (1997), ADHD and the nature of self-control, The Guilford Press, New York.

67 The word «blatte» has probably come to the Swedish language from colloquial French «blatte» and Italian «blatta», meaning «cockroach», «bug», with a strongly depreciatory value, indicating not only the dark colour of the skin, but also limited intelligence and general resistance (there is so many of «them», there is no way to exterminate them all). During my observation I found that the term has been incorporated by the migrants' jargon (slang) without any ascertainable awareness of its origins.
sharp reprimand would follow, in the attempt to discipline the emergent behaviour, but there would be no room for a critical analysis.

Only somewhat rarely, when associated to severely deviant behaviours or to severe inability to learn within the established frame, «otherness» is categorized as a form of «sickness» and «sociopathic disorder» (ASPD, anti-social personality disorder) and then disciplined, leading to marginalization and to formally established «special pedagogy». While the case of «sick» students has presented itself quite often (in certain classes up to 50% of the students were labelled as more or less «impaired»), I never observed directly any case of «sociopathic disorder»'s labelling. I have been told, though, that there had been a few cases and that they were related to drug-selling and consumption.

Anyway, this observation must be completed with a consideration: according to the school personnel and particularly to the teachers, the number of students qualified as «in need of special support» and actually accessing «special pedagogy» is much lower than it should be: on many occasions I have been told that up to 40% of the students currently enrolled would need «special support», and that the situation has been getting worse for some years: «students are not really what they used to be». The discrepancy between the students who should be granted access to «special pedagogy» and those who actually get it, was explained only with a lamentable lack of resources.

According to Joakim Isaksson, «en diagnos uppfattas av föräldrar och eleven som ett bevis på behov av stöd och underlättar även skolans prioriteringar i fördelningen av stödresurser och extra medel för åtgärder»68. It is therefore probable, as Isaksson states, that the reported increase of students «in need of special support» partly depends on an instrumental increase in identifying and diagnosing certain «difficulties» or «disorders» such as dyslexia, ASPD, ODD or ADHD. Any form of «difficulty» or "improper" behaviour would receive a medical label in order to be dealt with.

My observation allows me to agree with Isaksson and to formulate the hypothesis that the medical labelling answers essentially to two lines of thought: on one hand it grants access to the limited resources available; on the other hand, it produces a shift in the attribution of responsibility: the low performance on behalf of the student is, so to

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68 Isaksson, J. (2009), Spänningen mellan normalitet och avvikelse. Om skolans insatser för elever i behov av särskilt stöd, Umeå, in particular p. 9-10.
say, nobody's fault, since it has "natural causes". But actually, the focus is still on the individual's lack of performance and inability to be integrated, not on the context, on the social interactions. The legitimating power of medicine and biology allows transcending the individual "guilt" and responsibility. Once biologically founded, the inequalities are as unquestionable as impossible to relate to a broader problematic context. They can be treated with pills and are still, as Foucault maintained, not to blame on the individual but on his/her biology, on his/her pathological condition.

It is this *habitus* that allow the teachers not to question the efficacy of tests and evaluations based only on the possession of one kind of skills and knowledge, namely the ability to use "proper" language, to quote the "right" sources, to memorize the "important" data. The reproduction of inequalities at school, then, originates from the implementation of a formal egalitarianism: the teachers - and school in general - deal with diversity on the assumption that all have exactly the same rights. An assumption that still is more a wish than a reality. School treats as "equals" *de iure* individuals who are actually *de facto* "different", that is individuals who are unequally prepared by their families to assimilate the established pedagogical action.

In the United States and in many European contexts, namely in France, England, and Italy, the role of families and family background in social and scholastic reproduction has been clearly asserted. The same trend has been recently discovered in Sweden. It appears that family, as social institution, is taking over (or in a way taking back) school's role in the socialising process: the values and pedagogical capital acquired within family is getting gradually more important than those acquired at school.

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70 Bourdieu refers to this phenomenon with the term «familiarisation». On other contexts, see, for example, Ong-Dean, C. (2009), *Distinguishing Disability. Parents, Privilege, and Special Education*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

71 See Pressmeddelande (25 september 2009) - «Orsaker till försämrade skolresultat kartlaga: Social bakgrund har fått större betydelse» - [http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/2573/a/17272](http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/2573/a/17272), and Pressmeddelande (23 november 2009) - «Föräldrars utbildning påverkar elevers slutbetyg allt mer», [http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/2573/a/18069](http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/2573/a/18069); sessionId=A517BFDB1EA93F26D53CA417B54E02CAF.
4.3 From analysis to complexity.

The analysis of the information gathered through the interviews and the participant observations has produced the emergence of certain trends and lines of thought. In general, the results confirm a broad interpretative trend: despite all the attempts to reform it and democratize it, school is still an arena of social reproduction. Normalisation, naturalisation of inequalities, hierarchical classification of «otherness» and «difference», standardisation of languages, autocracy, technocracy all these dynamics and processes still represent the core of the pedagogical action in a school that seems to have entered a season of radical crisis: in many countries, the increasing success of private schooling and of personal tutoring and teaching has been interpreted, especially by some interested observers, as a symptom of the irreversible crisis of public education as we know it, that is, as a means of formation of critically thinking and participating citizens. The high tide of individualism, entrepreneurship, market-oriented society, has submerged the concept of a democratic school, a school for all, which has shown, in many ways, the inability to update its methods while maintaining unaltered its goals and structures. En skola för alla cannot risk becoming solely an empty slogan, something believed to be unrealistic. Nor can it be enforced at the cost of «diversity» and «otherness» in the form of being a good/bad, docile/rebel, healthy/sick student. Understanding how these dichotomies are formed as a cultural product implies not making them into legitimating instruments of separation, conservation, and reproduction.

In a similar way, the political arena has been recently characterized, in Sweden and abroad, by the aversion to acknowledge the legitimacy of the issues and instances represented by far-right and radical political parties such as the British National Party in the United Kingdom, the Front National in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, and Sverigedemokraterna in Sweden. Just as these new parties represent an implicit and explicit challenge to democracy as we know it, the democratic school system is challenged by «diversity», or rather by the idea of «diversity» as a pedagogical hinder, not as a pedagogical resource. «Otherness» is taxonomically identified and then set

72 About the three «paths of distraction», namely the «path of autocracy», the «path of technocracy» and the «path of effervescence», see Hargreaves, The Fourth Way, pp. 21-45.
apart and ignored, unless it becomes such a pedagogical problem (in case of disruptive behaviour or extremely low-performance) as to call for the intervention of «special pedagogy», that is the final attempt to normalise through stigmatisation. As usual, the stigma is not just enforced on individuals; it is generally accepted and welcomed by whoever receives it, since it allows to culturally deal with one's own perceived «otherness» and to externalize the cause of the social failure, shifting it from the individual to the pathology.

During my internship I have had a chance to observe this trend in the students, during the lessons, in social gatherings at the school coffee-shop, and in a few interviews I made with some of them. Not surprisingly, the most conservative students were those bearing the stigma of «obegåvade», «ungifted». A mark willingly, if unconsciously, assumed by its bearers, and connected with an explicit display of sexual (man/«bög»), national («svenne»/«invandrare»), and social (working class/«posh») identity. Again, as for the naturalisation of inequalities, three recurrent factors are ethnicity, class, and health.

In Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, the persistence of these dynamics answers to the conservation of *habitus*, to the transmission of cultural capital from generation to generation, to the reproductive means, which are, at the same time, the products and the producers of neo-liberal, ultra-conservative ideologies and policies. The role of individual agency in this process of reproduction and reconversion is limited, although not irrelevant nor, in any way, determined. In other words, Bourdieu himself believed in the possibility to affect this system and to achieve change, not just transformation and reconversion of the «ancient matter».

This is perhaps the core result of this analysis: to better understand how, on a local, «micro», scale, reproduction and reconversion are obstacles to achieving the change invoked as necessary by public opinions on a global scale and, among others, by Andy Hargreaves. This analysis aims at better understanding how «otherness», «diversity», «plurality» are categorized, hierarchically organized, considered as «distortions», «defects», «syndromes» to be cured, when instead they could actually constitute means on one hand to overcome the ancestral «fear of the other»74, the rejection of «complexity»; on the other hand to fill the perceived gap and contradiction

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between theory and practice, between the «school of diversity and plurality» and the school of «kunskapsmål», «performance», «driven-ness», both present in the current Läroplan (LPF-94).

Finally, this analysis tries to point at the necessity to question the unquestionable, question the values considered to be established for good and for all, understanding them as historical products, not as philosophical a priori. How else could we teach - for example - democracy, in a sociocultural perspective, to children who actually never experienced it as it is conventionally imagined? Far from being a historical constant, democracy is the result of actual political fights, even of revolutions, and of debates occurred for centuries or even millennia. It does not need to be internalised, instead it does need to be critically understood, reflected upon, talked about, and of course experienced in its many contexts.

The fundamental means of oppression and segregation (as opposed to democracy) lies, according to Bourdieu, already in the act of classifying, since the individuals involved in the process are not aware of the logic and the implications of this hierarchical organization and of this separation (we/others, healthy/sick, duktiga/svaga). At all school levels as well as before all kind of «otherness», the process of categorization may have its only justification in designing a pedagogical action actually individualised (or personalised) and not set to separate and distinguish, with the illusion to achieve, by this means, that inclusion/integration that would be in everybody's best interest. Complexity does not need integration, since it is already integrated in our society. To stop finding a remedy to it, is the first step toward an «ecology of education»⁷⁵.

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⁷⁵ I am, of course, paraphrasing the title of Gregory Bateson's Steps to an ecology of mind, quoted above.
5. Conclusions

This work aims to investigate how teachers perceive and deal with «diversity» and «otherness» and how this perception leads to «special pedagogical» actions which end up reinforcing and reproducing differences without allowing critical reflection on what are the features of these differences, what are they implications, what are the conditions under which they are normalised and assumed as stigma in the form of «learning difficulties» or «learning disabilities».

The sample and the field are far from being representative of the situation on a national, regional, or even local scale. Nevertheless the material gathered with the interviews and with the ethnographical observations allows me to draw a few preliminary conclusions. Of course, all generalisations imply the risk of repeating stereotypes and conventional - scientific or not - knowledge. I believe the best antidote against the reproduction of stereotypes lies in comparative approaches, which allow a better understanding of phenomena on a global scale and to be aware of the arbitrariness of all categories.

The current trend in school reforms - in Sweden and abroad - is surely part of wider global transformation and reconversion, characterised by increasing nationalism, individualism, entrepreneurship, and social segregation by means of normalisation, standardisation, and naturalisation of inequalities. Phenomena studied in different contexts, but undoubtedly occurring on a global scale.

The increasing demand of «special pedagogy» answers partly to this logic: the stigmatisation of «the other» seems to have become convenient for all social agents: for the «normal» students, finally free to achieve their full potential, and for the ones with «learning difficulties» and «in need of special support»; for the teachers, who can claim that the problem is not related to their teaching, for the parents, who can claim that the problem is not related to their parenting, and of course for the institutions, who can claim that the problem has biological causes and can be solved by means of dedicating more resources to it. Which explains why, before the perceived increase of «learning difficulties» or «disabilities», the focus is more and more placed on each individual and on his/her biology, in the effort to produce the internalisation of this set of differences based on health, class, gender, and ethnicity.
On the surface, all differences must be eliminated, rejected, denied as if they were *per se* bearing some form of guilt, while in fact they are made into problems by neo-liberal policies pushing to enforce the old class segregation, disguised as meritocracy. In the words of Hannah Arendt:

> That what makes the educational crisis in American [sic] so especially acute is the political temper of the country, which of itself struggle to equalize or to erase as far as possible the difference between young and old, between the gifted and the ungifted, finally between children and adults, particularly between pupils and teachers.  

It is interesting to note that the concept of «crisis», by definition connected to short chronologies, is still in place as a driving force in school reform all over the world. This would have been quite a long crisis, then.

The interviews and the observations showed me how «diversity» is perceived and how «otherness» is dealt with at *Cosifantutti* school. They also provided my with an explanation as to why and how the «need of special support» is perceived as increasing, while it's reduced implementation is lamented as a consequence of a contingent lack of resources. Actually, in the opinion and in the behaviour of all informants, «special support» in the form of a «special pedagogy» should be granted to all those students who experience «learning difficulties», students who are below the standards, students who cannot reach the *kunskapsmål*. This belief is not accompanied by a critical reflection on the pedagogical action, since the focus still lies mainly - also in the political debate and in the mass media - on the acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary to become a good citizen as well as on the grades (*betyg*), always assigned by means of notion-oriented knowledge. Yet the scientific debate on school and diversity points - implicitly or explicitly - towards a different direction, less oriented towards academically and socially dominant knowledge and, instead, towards a more open, individualised, critical, and reflexive «pedagogy of complexity».

Special pedagogy was born within an *episteme* which is still based on the rigid distinction between «normal» and «pathological», and it has enforced the *doxa* (that which is taken for granted in any given society) of «diversity» and «otherness» as

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social problems (some sort of burden weighing down the collective welfare) and individual pathologies.

After sweeping away all neo-positivistic illusions regarding the possibility of a ontologically unitary, "pure", and "exact" science of life, we are left with the hard task to keep on investigating complexity, rejecting all attempts to reduce it to formulae or to fragment it into unintelligible monads.
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Attachments
Attachment 1

Basic model of interview proposed to the teachers.

Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?

Har du alltid arbetat på gymnasiet?

Hur skulle du beskriva samverkan/samtal med dina kollegor? Kan du ge några exempel?

Hur skulle du beskriva dina elever? Kan du se några skillnader i jämförelse med dem du har haft tidigare?

Hur skulle du beskriva eventuella förändringar då?

Hur skulle du beskriva dina arbetsmetoder då och nu? Har de förändrats?

Enligt din åsikt, har antal elever i behov av särskilt stöd ökat?

Det påstås av många sociologer och statsvetare att vi leva i ett samhälle som kontinuerligt förändras. Vilka relationer anser du att det finns mellan skolans och samhällets förändringar?

Hur skulle du definiera en "duktig" elev och en elev med "svårigheter"?

Har du upplevt några skillnader när det gäller lärarens auktoritet inom klassen och elevernas disciplin, sedan du började jobba?

Hur kan man hitta någon balans mellan individualisering av undervisningen, en undervisning som skall anpassa sig till varje elev?

Kör du med åtgärdsprogram för elever som tolkas vara i behov särskilt stöd?
Anser du att metoderna för att arbeta med elever med behov av särskilt stöd är effektiva och adekvata? Fungerar de bra eller kanske inte så jättebra i sig själva?

Samarbetar ni bra med föräldrarna om detta? Brukar de hjälpa er med eleverna?

Skolan tolkas av många som i kris. Vad tror du det beror på? Har elevernas insats blivit sämre? (På vilket sätt)?

Om du fick tid att prata med skolministern, vilka förslag skulle du komma med för att förbättra situationen?

Bedömning och betygssättning. Vad är dina åsikter angående bedömning, hur använder du dig av bedömning som pedagogisk verktyg?

Anser du att betygssättningskriterier är tydliga för eleverna? Tror du att de är lätt att förstå?

Av forskare pratas om olika typer av intelligenser. Vad anser du angående detta?

Angående kriterier för betygssättning: har du upplevt några problem för att hitta en balans mellan det som sägs i lagen och praktiken?
## Grundskolan - Slutbetyg årskurs 9

**Uppdelat per föräldrarnas högsta utbildningsnivå**

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<th>Vad och definierar</th>
<th>Beskrivning och definition etc.</th>
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<td>* Antal elever</td>
<td>Denna statistikuppgift visar det totala antalet elever som var inskrivna i grundskolan i oktober valt år.</td>
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<td>* Andel elever (%)</td>
<td>Denna statistikuppgift visar andelen elever av det totala antalet elever.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Andel uppnått målen i alla ämnen</td>
<td>Andel elever med betyg i alla ämnen som ingått i elevens utbildning. Andelen beräknas av de elever som fått eller skulle ha fått betyg i alla ämnen enligt det mål- och kunskapsrelaterade betygssystemet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Andel behörig nat. prog.</td>
<td>Uppgiften avser andel elever med slutbetyg från grundskolans år 9 vårterminen valt år som uppnädde behörighet till gymnasieskolans nationella och specialutformade program.</td>
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<td>* Andel EUM i ett ämne</td>
<td>Andel elever som saknade betyg i ett ämne. Andelen beräknas av de elever som fått eller skulle ha fått slutbetyg enligt det mål- och kunskapsrelaterade betygssystemet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Andel EUM i två eller flera ämnen</td>
<td>Andel elever som saknade betyg i två eller flera ämnen (men inte i alla). Andelen beräknas av de elever som fått eller skulle ha fått slutbetyg enligt det mål- och kunskapsrelaterade betygssystemet.</td>
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</table>

* Utländsk bakgrund

Med att ha utländsk bakgrund menas dels personer som är födda utomlands, dels personer som är födda i Sverige och vars båda föräldrar är födda utomlands. Det innebär att om man är född i Sverige och har en förälder som är född utomlands definieras man inte som att man har "utländsk bakgrund".

* Föräldrarnas utbildningsnivå

Föraldrarnas högsta utbildningsnivå delas upp i tre grupper: förgymnasial (högst grundskola), gymnasial (högst gymnasieskola) och eftergymnasial (minst 30 poäng på universitet eller högskola eller fyraårig teknisk gymnasieutbildning).