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## **Exclusion or inclusion at school as consequence of economic hardship in childhood**

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### **Abstract**

*Sweden is an affluent country but in the midst of the welfare state some families suffer from economic hardship. This condition is especially frequent among single parent families, ethnic minority families and families with several children. We analyse the everyday life of children in such families and explore the impact of economic hardship on children in various contexts. This paper focuses on the school and to which extent schools deal with the inequality among children in order to give children from families who are hard up equal opportunities to schooling and a good social life within the school context. We use the UN convention on the rights of the child as the normative framework for our analyses.*

### **Introduction**

In the internationally context, economic hardship in childhood in Sweden has for a long time been seen as a marginal problem, due to the low rates of child poverty in international comparisons. During the recession in Sweden in the 1990s the rates increased quickly, and the problem was put on the Swedish political agenda. The last resort in supporting families who are hard up is through financial aid, which belongs to the needs-related part of the otherwise highly universal Swedish welfare state. Financial aid is regulated by law, but the law is more of a framework than a detailed regulation, which means that the local authorities have considerable independence in terms of the local organisation and implementation of the law. What does it mean to children and to their conditions in the school context that municipalities in Sweden have an extensive scope for action in their choice of methods to meet the aims of the Social Services Act? Does this mean that the social welfare agency and the local school cooperate in the support of poor children?

The Swedish compulsory school is free of charge and includes all equipment and lunch during school terms. There is however a possibility for the school to ask parents for minor contributions of money in connection with extra activities such as a visit to the theatre or to go swimming. There is however a more complex pattern of links between financial inequality and children's schooling which we will look into.

### **Aim of the project**

The project as a whole focuses on children's own perspectives, experiences in everyday life and financial and social strategies in interaction with children, parents and professionals at school and in the social welfare agencies. It furthermore analyses the

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visibility and agency of children within the social welfare agencies and other public agencies involved in such cases. Questions raised are:

- What does economic hardship mean to children in terms of material conditions, social relations, school work, identity or wellbeing?
- Which scope for individual agency do children see, and how do they use it?
- How does the legal framework, practices at school and at social welfare agencies construct the social positions of a child, mother and father in these cases? Are children seen as actors, victims, consumers or objects of their parents' responsibility as providers?
- Are children allowed any scope for action in financial decision-making in families and/or welfare agencies? If so, what kind of agency and what happens when they participate?
- Which kind of interpretative framework concerning children's actions is used by the adults involved in the interaction with children?
- Do the various adult agents involved cooperate?
- How do children understand and act in relation to the way they are handled in the decision-making processes?

In this paper we focus on to which extent primary schools deal with financial inequality among children in order to provide equal opportunities for learning and a good social life at school to all children. How is this kind of inequality understood by schools and social welfare agencies? Is there an awareness of a negative impact of poverty and how do these institutions cope with such a problem? <sup>1</sup>

### **Earlier research and theorising**

Several studies have shown that parents in general give priority to the consumption of their children, which means that differences in household income are not equally visible in the material standard of children (Näsman & von Gerber 1996; SOU 2001:51, Hölscher 2003) except for in the poorest families (Hölscher op. cit., Middleton & Adelman 2001). Earlier research has shown that due to economic hardship about 5% of the pupils in grade 5 and 10% in grade 9 had to refrain from an activity organised by their school (Näsman & von Gerber 2003).

One aspect of particular importance to learning in the school situation is access to a computer. A national survey in Sweden could not find any difference in access to computer at home between children depending on family income (SOU 2001:51). Economic hardship can because of its material consequences in children's life also have an impact on social relationships. In relationships between pupils clothes and other belongings are status markers. Children are aware from an early age of the social and cultural normality demands and compare themselves with others (van-der-Hoek 2002; Willis 1990, Hölscher op. cit.). To get and keep a good social position can be hard for children living in economic hardship (Ridge 2002, Hölscher op. cit.). Their own financial scope for action may be severely limited by reduced or lack of pocket money (Shropshire & Middleton 1999; Middleton et al. 1994, Näsman & von Gerber 1996,

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<sup>1</sup> The project is funded by the Swedish council for working life and social research.

2001). Poor children may feel different and may be teased, lose their friends and be excluded from the activities of the same age group, experiences they also fear and develop strategies to prevent and cope with (Näsman & von Gerber 1996, Hölscher op. cit., SOU 2001:51, Tvetene 2001, Salmi 2002, Ridge 2002, Daly & Leonard 2002). However, according to the Swedish national survey (SOU 2001:51) children in economic hardship are not bullied more often than others and they have a friend at school as frequently as others.

Children refrain from expressing their needs at school (Hölscher op cit, Roker op cit) and find strategies to protect their parents by not telling them (Ridge 2002). They may also take part in the secrecy strategies of their parents. Children may actively strive to keep their social relationships and their own social status by keeping up appearances (Ridge 2002). Hölscher (op cit) describes how children, because of shame and anxiety over exclusion by classmates and their group, disclose their financial difficulties to them or anticipate exclusion by withdrawal. In the long run these strategies mean a risk of losing friends.

The question arises as to whether and how the various material needs mentioned above and other related problems are acknowledged by schools and social welfare agencies, and furthermore what are the consequences if these needs are hard to fulfil. International research shows that in the school situation children suffer from increases in both depression and aggression. The children are lacking in social competence and get themselves into trouble. Difficulties in concentrating mean lower grades and hence poorer chances on the labour market. (Hölscher op cit)

### **Theoretical framework**

The project takes as its starting point the international sociology of childhood, which means a view of children as a social category in society, socially constructed as the members inhabiting childhood which is seen as a life phase in the life course institution where age is the basis, forming an age order in society (Qvortrup 1994; Näsman 1994, 1995, 2004, Närvänen & Näsman 2004). Childhood is a social position in the age structure, the child is seen as an actor, and children's agency in society and in various contexts and situations, is a crucial research issue (Närvänen & Näsman 2005, 2007a, b). Normality and deviance in society is defined as based on age, in relation to the age order. Children's resources and opportunities materially, socially and culturally are conditioned by their position in relation to other age categories. Children are constituted and constitute other positions in the network of relationships in which the child's position gets its meaning: child-adult, child-parent, pupil-teacher, and etcetera. Children take part as actors in these relationships, and perform age related subject positions, i.e. they reproduce, negotiate, contest and change them, what Alanen calls 'generationing' (Alanen 2001), but we prefer to talk about them as the 'doing age' (Näsman & Gerber 2003, Närvänen & Näsman 2005). The project also relates to research on children's rights and participation (see Archard 1993, Hart 1997; Näsman 2004).

### Discursive orders

What kinds of discourses are expressed in these areas that form the discourse order in the context? The schools and social welfare agency, part of the municipalities, are organisations forming a context for the procedures around cases of economic hardship. The issue at stake, economic hardship, refers to issues of normality and deviance, integration and exclusion in childhood.

School discourse focuses on learning and children's difficulties in learning. Since the primary school in principle is free of costs, economic problems in the family should not have any direct impact on the school situation of the child. The dominant discourse hence does not include any knowledge or routines of measures to deal with this. Economic problems appearing at school are exceptions. Children are to be treated as equals in economic terms. Economic problems are family problems which may have an impact indirectly via the child's wellbeing. Such issues are to be handled by the staff involved in pupil care, who may refer the children to other agencies within the health care or social welfare system.

The social welfare benefit in Sweden is supposed to give a level of living standard comparable to that of an ordinary low income earner. This is the basis of normality. The benefit is furthermore seen as a temporary support, for those who for a short time period are in need of support, which limits the kind of consumption that is normally included in everyday life consumer goods, and these are enumerated in the national documents on the issue. The financial norm for children's consumption needs varies by age, which is motivated by general estimates of what is needed in different phases of childhood. This gives an image of what is considered a normal and hence socially acceptable level of living of a child at a certain age in Swedish society. Below this level is the minimum level of resources needed to manage basic daily needs, which may be granted to those who for some reason are not entitled to financial aid, but are deemed not to have access to any resources for their daily living. This situation is known in Swedish under the label 'nöd' (distress/need/emergency)

Sweden has ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In connection with economic hardship and financial aid some parts are of particular interest, schools as well as social welfare agencies should take the child's best interest into consideration in decision making (article 3): '*States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents*' ... and Article 27 '*The parent(s) ... have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.*' Do these phrases in the social welfare agency legitimate a focus on parents' labour market participation? On the other hand, article 27 states: '*States Parties... shall take appropriate measures to assist parents ... to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.*'

The following statement in article 3: '*States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities...*' opens the opportunity for the

agencies to set the standards of support to children according to their professional judgement. On the other hand article 4 states that: '*with regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources...*', and in article 6: '*States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child*' – requirements that, in a very rich country such as Sweden, put the demands at a high level. This relates to the stress on health in article 24 and on cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity in article 31.

National Swedish agencies have reviewed the social welfare work on a local level to see to which extent the UNCRC is implemented in the practices in financial aid cases. The conclusion was that agencies do not document children's situations and how the decisions of the agency may have an impact on children (Socialstyrelsen 2001; Socialstyrelsen and Länsstyrelserna 2003). The local staff does not have the competence to apply a child's perspective and they often see it as difficult to talk to children and to interpret what children say (ibid). The discourse on children's agency such as expressed in the UNCRC (article 12) is obviously not common in social welfare agencies in these cases.

Overall Sweden as other countries is dominated by a discourse on children based on 'the age order', where the middle ages in the life course have the highest status. On the basis of their status they have the privilege of interpretation, and the ability to constrain the agency of those in other age categories, i.e. what Hockey and James (1993) called the 'ideological dominance of adulthood', which is based on the contribution to the labour force of the middle age category (Turner 1989). Is this particular context also dominated by the discourse of subordination of children as human beings, interacting with the general discourse of dependency related to poverty and financial aid?

The demanding policy in the financial aid system described in the introduction could be labelled a *discourse of discipline*. Financial aid hence refers to phenomena normatively related to shame and guilt as well as the stereotypes of immorality such as laziness, carelessness, parasitism and other character traits, i.e. stigmatisation as degradation of character (Goffman 1968; Boglind, Lundén & Näsman 1971). Children at school may suffer from primary stigmatisation due to their own appearance, behaviour and conditions as well as from secondary stigmatisation related to the stigma of their parents.

## Methods

The data we use for this preliminary discussion are from interviews with teachers and school nurses and staff at social welfare agencies. The data was gathered in two municipalities, a city and a minor town, in areas where economic hardship was widespread. These areas are also characterised by a large proportion of children with an immigrant background and among the adult population frequent unemployment and several other social problems.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to unanimous descriptions in the two agencies

The interview schedules are structured but open ended and conducted in a flexible way allowing for follow up questions and reversal of order of questions as is fit in the particular conversation taking place. The interviews are recorded and transcribed.

### **Norms, values and strategies among school staff**

The school staff in both the studied areas give a picture of a divided society with both families who are well off and poor families living in misery. The different forms of housing are used to symbolise the different financial conditions. This means that on a general level staff are aware that they daily see pupils with very different financial conditions at home. In both areas staff described single cases where pupils lived in misery, for instance in homelessness. This could either be mentioned in a matter of fact manner, as more or less natural and accepted, or could be part of a strongly expressed criticism of the social welfare agency's incompetence and a frustration over lack of power on behalf of the school. This acknowledgement of poverty in the area is not the same as knowing in each case which pupils have financial difficulties.

### **Visibility of poverty**

Even though school staff in general seemed well aware of social differences in the geographical area of the school, they rarely spoke with one another about economic hardship among the pupils. The children do not tell about the financial situation, but the parents complain in general about their hardship to the school nurses. Poverty also comes to the attention of the school nurse when the check-up of children's sight shows a need for glasses, or when glasses are broken, and the parents announce that they cannot afford new ones. The nurse is repeatedly reminded of this condition when these children get headaches during school hours because of their sight difficulties. Parents may also bring up economic problems in connection with medicine. Another area where the signs of poverty appear is in pupils clothing. Too small, too large or worn out clothes indicate financial problems. Poor hygiene is another indicator.

Teachers bring economic hardship among the pupils to the nurses' attention in connection with excursions, especially sports trips. This involves demands for contributions for food and bus fare, fees for ski-lifts etc, which means that children in families who are hard up cannot afford to participate. The problem is raised in the staff group: how are we to make it possible for this child to take part?

School nurses comment, however, that it is difficult to separate economical difficulties in the family from other social problems such as mental illness or drug abuse. In addition to this, teachers see alternative explanations for differences in clothes and equipment such as cultural differences when it comes to outdoor activities.

### **Equipment and participation**

Some schools with an awareness of the risk of exclusion of children from participation due to lack of equipment, develop a policy to offer equipment for the kind of physical training activities included at school as well as paying for various costs at these occasions.

Another policy is to restrict which kind of activities the school offers to the pupils. Skiing may be too expensive and winter sports are hence restricted to skating. Skates and helmets are available at school. The quality standard may also be reduced in order to limit the costs of parents such as when special sports shoes are not demanded in the physical training lessons. To quote one of the interviewed teachers: *'They are allowed to be bare foot in physical training lessons if they do not have sports shoes.'* The school may also share knowledge with the parents about where second hand equipment may be bought cheaply.

The policy to lower the standard or to choose activities that all pupils can take part in means inclusion without financial differences necessarily becoming visible. The policy to give extra support or offer school equipment to children in need means inclusion since the children get the opportunity to participate but at the same time means making difference an issue and demonstrating awareness of the child as needy which may have a stigmatising impact. The staff in some of those cases demonstrated an awareness of this kind of measure as problematic due to the risk for stigmatisation, when they commented upon the secrecy strategies they used in order not to disclose their support to the other pupils. Though this strategy is well meant, it nevertheless clearly sends the message to the pupil in need that its condition is shameful and deviant. Other teachers seem to see the problems as solved when equipment is offered without any reflections about risks for stigmatisation.

An intermediate category of strategies was the so-called long loans, where money contributions were, in a face-saving way, labelled as loans which will never be paid back. We have no indication of the pupils being aware of the loan conditions.

Another equipment strategy was for the school nurses to apply for funding from a charity. In this way the extra costs for participation may be solved and also hygiene products could be offered without costs. We have also seen that in at least one case the school actively chose to refer a family in need of funding for purchasing a pair of glasses to a charity instead of the local social welfare agency. It was implied that the family in question would get help faster by contacting the charity; it was also a matter of helping the family to avoid an exhaustive and possibly stigmatising process with the social services.

The official financial demands upon the pupil's family in terms of monetary contributions are as mentioned above very small; there are however unofficial unlimited demands for contributions in kind that can be attributed to what we elsewhere have described as the 'normal life of children' (Fernqvist & Näsman 2006), i.e. an understanding of children's lives as unproblematic and economically solid which of course excludes the experiences and strategies of children living in economic hardship. A question then arises as to what extent does this mean exclusion of children, and does this exclusion become visible at school, as was the case in physical training activities? Equipment needed for doing homework may not come to the fore to the same extent. Access to a computer at home is important in order to fulfil the schoolwork, but as mentioned statistics indicate that access to that in general do not vary depending on the parents' income. Some of the interviewed teachers also mention the use of calculators as



a fundamental part of the education in mathematics; the school does not however pay for such expenses. The amount of money that is required to buy a calculator may, with an understanding of the normal life of children, not be perceived as a heavy expense, but it may be so in a family with scarce financial resources.

School staff also mentioned the conditions of the poor as having an impact in terms of inequality in conditions for homework. Poorly paid jobs often mean long working hours to make a living and, among the immigrants, to save money to support their relatives and visit them in the old country. Long working hours meant either children left alone at home after school or long hours in day care. These parents did not have time to care for and support their children according to the staff.

As shown in earlier research children are, from an early age, well aware of material status symbols. The school culture can, however, according to school staff mean that children are tolerant in same age relationships and at the same time have a feeling for and comment upon the brands of shoes, cell phones etcetera. The access to proper clothes as one of the important status markers is not possible to solve by any of the mentioned school strategies. The way that clothes function as a status marker among pupils at school<sup>3</sup> is indeed a more informal stigmatising mechanism, and by being so it may be harder to detect among the staff at school. We have however observed that pupils as well as teachers are highly aware of the impact clothing with expensive or popular brands has on the school culture; even so, the acknowledgement of bullying and other forms of exclusion (and thereby putting economic hardship into the context of school culture and 'peering') based on a pupil's lack of branded clothes due to scarce financial resources is barely visible in our material, either among the pupils or the school staff.

The cooperation between public schools and charities is in stark contrast to the relationship between the social welfare agencies and the charity organisations. The only contact that the social services accepted was when the charity helped clients in their contact with the public authorities. They did not want to use the opportunity to add to the financial support of families via those channels.

### **Cooperation between institutions**

The managers at the social welfare agencies stress in accordance with *the discipline discourse* that the focus in their work is on the parents and measures that make them able to provide for themselves. As one of them sums this perspective up: '*The best interest of the child is a parent at work.*' The school staff on the other hand also describe the situation when parents focus hard on paid work, i.e. to earn money, meaning less parental support of children, since the parents spend too much time away from home and can be exhausted when at home. The focus on parents in the financial aid services when addressing the best interest of the child may explain why there is such a clear avoidance of talking to children in the financial aid departments of the social welfare agency. This avoidance does not mean that children's interests are neglected, but the interpretation of their needs is based on either information from the parents or on the professional understanding of the social welfare agency in itself. The special measures of support to

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<sup>3</sup> For empirical findings supporting this claim, see for example Ridge (2002)

children are oriented to their lives outside the school context. Extra resources may be transferred to parents for spare time activities and for travels etcetera during vacation periods such as at Christmas and in summer. This means a presumption of the school time as without financial demands. Since research in other countries shows that children have strategies to protect their parents from the burden of these demands by not telling about them, parents are not enough as a knowledgebase about school demands (Ridge 2002).

If the social welfare officers involuntarily see children, such as when parents bring them to the agency, they try not to talk to them or eventually only ask in general (polite) terms about how they are doing at school. This does not invite a presentation of financial demands at school. There are no routines for contact between school staff and social welfare agencies in cases of economic hardship. This leads to the children not being given a voice and hence not getting the support they need. Pupils with economic problems at home seem only to get attention for these problems if they are connected to other social problems. The school nurses are then the channel for contact with the child welfare officers who may during their investigations realise that the family also has financial difficulties. The lack of cooperation between the authorities means that it is hard to work with prevention since the acknowledgement of financial needs often seems to come in the back door when other problems are on the agenda.

This gap means that children who, due to lack of resources, cannot get for example glasses or medicine from their parents, may end up without these if not supported by charities due to the information from the school nurse, who does not always know if there are such possibilities. School nurses describe how children cannot fully follow the teaching or suffer from headaches due to such shortcomings in the support system.

One of the difficulties in cooperation raised by school staff relates to secrecy. When they contact the social welfare agencies about a pupil they cannot get information about whether the family is already a client, and they are not informed about what, if anything, happens after the school has reported to the agency. From the school's perspective it is very frustrating: as one of the nurses expressed it: '*Skip the secrecy!*' Secrecy means that follow-up of cases is impossible and also excludes the usage of the potential cooperation between the agency and the school where pupils spend most of their everyday life. The secrecy principles within the social welfare system are in this context restraining the school's scope for agency when it comes to aiding children and families living in economic hardship. One may even suggest that protecting the secrecy in this context may in fact make it more difficult for the schools to implement the UNCRC. When it comes to emotional and social problems the schools have resources as well as channels to others to give support and find solutions but they cannot contribute financially to the families. A staff member that has a position as a bridge between the two agencies is a local measure under development at one of the schools.

One category of family that appears to be especially vulnerable from the perspective of both school staff and the social welfare agencies are those who have an income just above the norm for social benefits. The social welfare officers describe these parents as struggling hard to get by in a stressful situation on the brink of collapse. This condition may be worse than the one for those who get financial aid. The school staff focuses on

this category indirectly when they criticise the social welfare agencies for raising the threshold for financial aid.

### **Exclusion or inclusion**

So far we have seen a negative impact of economic hardship in several areas. Glasses and medicine, and the learning consequences that follows if these needs are not fulfilled, are unquestionable responsibilities of a welfare state. How about the (frequent) impact of economic hardship on physical training classes? This often low status subject of the curriculum has well documented importance for children's learning as well as their health. The outdoor activities may furthermore be seen as important in offering refugee children an entrance into dominant sports in the Swedish culture.

We have seen that the schools strategies demonstrate an awareness of some risks of exclusion. Some of these strategies are clearly inclusive while others combine an intent to include with some risks of exclusion due to individualisation and hence differential treatment. This difference fits into the discussion of the different kinds of welfare systems: on the one hand side institutionalised universalism, and on the other differential treatment of those most in need. Another risk factor is that the school staff, as well as the pupils, seem reluctant to talk about economic hardship and hence, as part of their daily routines, avoid recognising such problems. These then only appear in particular situations while other needs may stay unseen. There are also areas where the policies for equality and inclusion are not sufficient such as in the pupils' dress codes. Working with the pupils' culture and social relationship patterning therefore appear as crucial additional areas to consider.

Other risk factors for exclusion are found in the links between public agencies such as differences in policies, secrecy principles and the different perspectives and knowledge bases, which mean that the different authorities do not cooperate.

We see a potential for improvement in using the UNCRC as the basis for mutual development of understanding, increased knowledge and competence in focusing on children, their needs, interests and strategies. Working on this project, we have however observed that the implementation of the UNCRC does not seem to be a highly prioritised task among schools and social service agencies. The general value basis of the convention – the child's best interest as the guiding principle as well as the general idea about a child perspective – are acknowledged by both agencies, but the more detailed norms in the various paragraphs, are not systematically used to confront the practices in everyday decision making. Even though ambiguous in the view on the child and the child-parent relationship, if these paragraphs were put on the table for a joint discussion, this might be a way of developing further awareness and understanding of the differences in the perspectives in the two agencies. Areas may be found where a common view could grow and new ways of practices for cooperation could be developed.

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