

# Chapter 11

## Nordic Upper Secondary School: Regular and Irregular Programmes – Or Just One Irregular School for All?

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### 11.1 Introduction

The Nordic countries hold a strong belief in education as a means of creating democracy, and they share a strong commitment to equality, social justice and inclusion. In this regard, the countries embody resembling traits of an egalitarian school system (Wiborg 2004). The endeavours towards an inclusive School for All have been long-lasting, as noted in the country reports, and gradually the vision of a comprehensive School for All students has widened its range and applies at present to primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school.

The key topic of this chapter is the enactment of the inclusive vision of a School for All in upper secondary education and training in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In these three countries, it has become apparent that the ambition to include all students, regardless of place of residence, social background, gender, ethnicity, ability and attainment, faces major challenges. Particularly the high number of students leaving school with no formal qualifications raises political and public concerns. As a response to this problem, commonly addressed as dropout (Bäckmann et al. 2011; Markussen 2010), the three countries issue a range of alternative and targeted programmes. These programmes are in various degrees connected to and disconnected from the regular upper secondary programmes, and they form a band of special or irregular programmes.

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Our aim is to bring a selection of these irregular programmes to the fore through an analysis in which focus is on the educational purposes of the programmes and how they play into the construction of a School for All. The research questions we seek to answer are:

- What irregular programmes are introduced to meet and reduce the dropout problem?
- How do the educational purposes of these programmes play into the construction of a school all?

The context of this investigation encompasses an outline of the theoretical framework, which concentrates on the notions of *inclusive education* and *purpose of education*, and of upper secondary school and the dropout situation in the three countries. Here we set the scene for the subsequent case presentations of irregular programmes in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. We will not provide a broad outline of measures to prevent dropout. Rather, we will report on specific national cases of irregular programmes. These programmes differ in terms of entry procedures, structures, contents and goals. What they have in common, however, is a distinct target group. The students are characterised by a number of ‘soft categories’: ‘low academic attainment’, ‘lack of motivation’ and ‘high levels of absenteeism’. This being the common ground, the chosen cases are *Schools of Production* as an individually planned education programme in Denmark, *Alternative strand of courses with extended workplace practice* in Norway and (the Individual programme and) *the Introduction programme* in Sweden. Through a cross-case reading, the final discussion returns to the questions of the educational purposes of the programmes and how these programmes contribute to an upper secondary School for All.

## 11.2 Theoretical Framework

### 11.2.1 *Inclusive Upper Secondary Education: Through Irregular Schools?*

... many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, others are placed in various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational experiences, and some simply chose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives (Ainscow and Miles 2008:16).

Faced with such challenges, the authors argue that there is evidence of an increased interest in the idea of inclusive education. However, the term inclusive education is characterised by confusion and conceived in a myriad of ways. Within and across countries interpretations range from inclusion concerned with disability and ‘special educational needs’, with groups vulnerable to exclusion, to the promotion of a school and education for all. Pertinent to the ambition of an upper secondary School for All, this investigation builds upon the latter conception which advocates that (1) inclusion is concerned with all students; (2) it is focused on presence, participation and achievement; (3) inclusion and exclusion are linked together, so that inclusion involves the

active combating of exclusion; and (4) inclusion is seen as a never-ending process (Ainscow and Miles 2008:20). What, then, does this inclusive turn imply for education policies and practices?

Roger Slee (2011:ix) asserts that inclusive education is a project of ongoing political struggle and cultural change in which the crux is a reconsideration of public education, its foundation and future. In this respect, the future of inclusive education is a continuation of the promotion of a School for All, continually reducing barriers to participation and learning and affirming the rights of all to access, participation and success in education. This task, according to Slee, involves a widening of the scope of educational facilities, thus creating 'the irregular school'. The bottom line of this argument refers to 'the regular school' and how this term is frequently offered as the counterpoint to the term 'special school', and hence marks a clear distinction between the regular and the irregular, i.e. the special. Slee contends this distinction in which some students are offered a subordinate outsider position, and he challenges the policies and practices of ascending and descending values to different students.

In the following we draw on Slee's ideas and investigate how the special or irregular programmes at upper secondary level intersect with the distinction between the regular and the special. Do the irregular programmes perpetuate and harden social division – or do they have a say in the construction of an irregular upper secondary school?

Of particular importance to this investigation, Slee (2011:42) recommends research to reframe and to search for alternative visions of the purpose, character and practice of schooling and to ask provocative questions as to what exclusion is, who is in and who is out, how this happens and inclusion into what?

### ***11.2.2 What, Then, Is the Purpose of Education?***

Biesta (2010:2) reminds us that education, be it in the form of schooling, workplace learning or vocational training, is by its very nature a process with direction and purpose. Still, what these processes aim to achieve are difficult and contentious questions. Moreover, the current neo-liberal policy imperatives of standards, accountability and utility maximisation close off debate about educational values and goals (Brantlinger 2006; Skrtic and McCall 2010; Biesta 2010).

Biesta (2009) contests the rise of the measurement culture in education and the ways in which market thinking and competition, instrumentality and standardisation, managerialism and technical practice, have become the order of the day. Contrary to this narrow conceptualisation, he enjoins educational research to re-engage with questions concerning what constitutes good education and what are the aims and purposes of education.

Educational processes and practices generally serve three purposes, he maintains, namely, qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Composed on this closely connected threefold, he proposes an analytical device to explore in what ways educational processes and practices have an impact. Clearly, a major role of education lies in the qualification of students, young people and adults: 'It lies in providing them

with the knowledge, skills and understanding and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgment that allow them to ‘do something’ – a ‘doing’ which can range from the very specific [...] to the much more general [...]’ (Biesta 2009:40). Accordingly, qualification is not restricted to preparation for working life. Providing students with knowledge, skills and understandings is significant for other aspects of life (ibid.), for instance, for citizenship and for cultural literacy in general.

Socialisation is about how we, through education, become members of particular social, cultural and political ‘orders’. Through its socialising function education inserts individuals into existing ways of doing and being, and in this way education plays an important role in the continuation of culture and tradition, both with regard to its desirable and its undesirable aspects (Biesta 2010).

Subjectification refers to the process of becoming a subject, or an individual, and to the quality, or types of subjectification made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements and configurations (Biesta 2009, 2010). He underlines that ‘[...] any education worthy of its name should always contribute to processes of subjectification that allow those being educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting’ (Biesta 2009:41). Moreover, subjectification articulates that being and becoming a subject is thoroughly interactional and social and also thoroughly ethical and political (Biesta 2010:129), and therefore discussions about good education are closely connected with the idea of social justice and democracy (Biesta 2010:92).

When considering the domain of ‘irregular programmes’, the three purposes of education invoke several provocative questions. What processes or conditions do the irregular programmes offer in terms of qualification, socialisation and subjectification – and how do these processes play into the democratic idea of inclusive education?

### ***11.2.3 Upper Secondary School and Dropout***

Notwithstanding the distinct similarities across educational systems in the Nordic countries, substantial differences are apparent at upper secondary school level. At the level of educational policy, governments assert a shared set of objectives. Upper secondary school is to produce the human capital needed by the labour market and hence to secure continued production, efficiency and competitiveness. In addition, governments aim at facilitating conditions for universal access and equal educational opportunities. It is vital that all students, regardless of social origins, gender, culture, ethnicity and attainments, are equally entitled to pursue their educational plans. Differences between the countries emerge when it comes to school structure, access requirements and how the notion of dropout is defined and addressed.

According to Markussen (2010:12), the overall structure of upper secondary education in Sweden, Denmark and Norway constitutes a continuum from an integrated one track model in Sweden to the Danish two track model. In Sweden upper secondary school encloses a variety of programmes of 3-year duration, in which the ‘old’ classical grammar schools and the ‘new’ vocational educational training (VET) are combined within a single institution, termed ‘the National Programme’.

The Danish upper secondary education, termed 'Youth Education', comprises two tracks, vocational and academic. The vocational track (VET) includes several independent programmes, lasting between 1.5 and 5.5 years, in which students are qualified for different trade certificates (Wiborg and Cort 2008). The academic track, normally of 3-year duration, qualifies for higher education. Positioned in-between these two, the Norwegian model may be described as semi-integrated. Here upper secondary education and training encompasses 12 programmes, three provide academic qualifications for higher education and nine vocational qualifications. The general academic programmes are of 3-year duration, whilst the vocational education and training programmes in most cases follow a two-plus-two-year structure, 2 years of school-based education and training followed by 2 years of apprenticeship provided by an enterprise or public institution.

Sweden, Denmark and Norway each regulates access to upper secondary education differently. In the Swedish structure, access to the regular 'National Programme' requires passed exams at lower secondary level in a number of subjects. Students who fail to meet this requirement are offered a range of upper secondary introduction programmes. In contrast to this selective access regulation, the Danish and Norwegian system do not require passed exams or grades at lower secondary level. Still, students with low academic attainments are subjected to professional/expert assessment which might conclude with transference to an irregular programme.

In all three school systems, the majority of every lower secondary education completion cohort enters upper secondary education. However, only 60–80 % of the cohort completes upper secondary education. This situation has made the issue of school dropout a common concern.

Across European countries there seems to be an understanding of dropout as signifying a person 'who is no longer at school and does not hold an upper secondary qualification' (Lamb and Markussen 2011:5). According to this definition, the term school incorporates both school-based education and workplace training. And this definition is often applied by the European Union to measure and report statistical rates of early school leaving (ibid.). Behind this general consensus, considerable bewilderment remains about how to measure and compare dropout. This is partly caused by the fact that across nations and educational systems, upper secondary education programmes have different durations, different standards and types of differentiated certifications and qualifications, and partly by registration difficulties.

## **11.3 Irregular Programmes to Meet and Reduce Dropout**

### ***11.3.1 Denmark: Schools of Production***

Upper secondary education in Denmark has retained a system of two distinct sectors, the vocational and the academic, gymnasium sector (Rasmussen 2002). Approximately 30 % of every lower secondary education completion cohort enters the VET track, whilst 55 % enters the academic (Wiborg and Cort 2008). Both tracks provide access to tertiary-level, higher education programmes, depending on

the programmes' specific entry requirements. At the political level, the goal is that 95 % of every youth cohort will complete a programme of upper secondary education and training.

Due to this 95 % objective, overall efforts against dropout have been strengthened. Schools are required to prepare plans of action with goals and strategies instrumental to increase completion in which guidance, mentoring and teacher-student contact are emphasised (Danish Ministry of Education 2010:13). These measures apply especially to VET programmes, where the highest dropout rates are found.

When young people leave upper secondary education or they are considered not ready for a regular programme, they might be guided into an irregular or so-called individually planned education programme (UddannelsesGuiden 2012). Two options are available: Schools of Production and Youth Education Adapted for Young People with Special Needs.<sup>1</sup> Here we will focus on Schools of Production.

At Schools of Production young people may try out various practical subjects and activities, and they may follow classes in general school subjects at lower secondary level. With reference to content and available experiences, structure and aims, the Schools of Production are said to represent a 'third way of education' (Produktionsskoleforeningen 2007). This implies 'education, neither academic, nor vocational but (a personalized) education tailored to students who are not motivated for the traditional types of education' (ibid.). In general, the individual is entitled to attend the programme for a maximum of one year.

The first Schools of Production in Denmark were established in 1978, and by 1985 the number of schools had increased to 57 (Clemmensen et al. 2000). The first Schools of Production enactment, from 1978, stipulated that the schools were to provide combined teaching and production programmes for 'young people out of work' to improve their opportunities of entering a qualifying education or the labour market. In later revisions of the Schools of Production Act (from 1995 onwards), the target group is changed from young people out of work to young people under 25 who have not completed an upper secondary education. The target group is thus altered from youth in lack of employment to youth in lack of education. The number of schools peaked in the late 1990s and reached about 110 (Clemmensen et al. 2000). Since then there has been a steady decrease to the present number of about 80, which are distributed all over the country.

The recent Act on Schools of Production, issued in 2010, directly specifies the target group of production schools as young people who have not yet initiated, have not completed or have interrupted an upper secondary education. Since 2005 the schools are required only to assign applicants who have been assessed, identified and classified within the specific target group by the local Youth Guidance Centres (at the municipality level), and who accordingly is entitled to a state grant. Further, the law postulates that the aim of the programme is threefolded: to contribute to the personal development of the participants, to improve their opportunities for entering

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<sup>1</sup> This is a 3-year special programme for young people who have cognitive and physical disabilities which was established in 2007. Due to its novelty the number of participants is still very limited and there is only a preliminary evaluation of this programme (Jørgensen 2010:50).

the labour market and to contribute to the development of their interest in and ability of active participation in a democratic society. In addition, the law asserts that the programme will prepare socially strained youth for future jobs and education by offering an integration of educational, social and work experiences. In consequence, the programme is required to assure the students' qualifications for both working life and citizenship. However, the schools do not award formally recognised degrees or apply work examinations.

In practice, production is meant to be the entrance to education, and work is to be carried out in an educational setting. For this to function, the work has to be experienced as meaningful and realistic. To this effect, the programmes have to produce various goods and services, preferably tradable on the market. The centre of every school is the workshop, where the students learn through practical work in co-operation with a teacher, who as a rule is a skilled craftsman. The schools usually have a wide range of workshops at their disposal, ranging from traditional workshops of carpentry and metalwork to media workshops and theatre workshops (Pless 2009; Rasmussen and Rasmussen 2009). To make the young people feel responsible for the production, they participate in all aspects from decision-making to commercial dealings.

At the Schools of Production, individual guidance and counselling are essential (UddannelsesGuiden 2012). The participants are required to develop a plan over future choices of work or education, and to support reflections and determinations they are offered daily individual guidance. The consideration of the particular interests and needs of each individual is a highly valued aspect of the content of the programmes. To the students, however, being subjected to close supervision might be conceived as being under constant surveillance and thus restricting autonomy and independence.

In Table 11.1, we present figures on student progression after completing Schools of Production, for the years 2007, 2008 and 2009:

**Table 11.1** Student progression after completing Schools of Production

Year of completion/followed by	2007	2008	2009
Regular upper secondary education	29.4 %	31.1 %	36.5 %
Folk high schools <sup>a</sup>	1.6 %	1.6 %	1.3 %
Other education activities	4.4 %	4.9 %	4.9 %
Regular employment	23.3 %	20.2 %	11.7 %
Subsidised employment	2.1 %	2.2 %	2.4 %
Unemployment	18.0 %	17.7 %	19.5 %
Other/dropout <sup>b</sup>	9.3 %	22.3 %	23.7 %
Unknown	11.9 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
Total	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %
<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>8,851</b>	<b>9,500</b>	<b>10,261</b>

Reference: Uni\*C Statistics and Analysis (2010)

<sup>a</sup>The Danish folk high school is a boarding school offering non-formal adult education. Regularly, students are between 18 and 24 years old and duration is 4 months. There are no academic access requirements and no exams. A diploma conferring attendance is issued upon completion

<sup>b</sup>The term 'other' refers to a spectrum, for example, military service, maternity leave or foreign exchange



As shown in Table 11.1, the majority (56.8 %) of the participants that completed in 2009 went on to regular education, to other types of education or to regular or subsidised employment. The majority of this group (36.5 %) went on to regular education, which represented an increase compared to the two previous years, whereas progression to regular employment (11.7 %) saw a decrease compared to earlier.

In 2010, yet another amendment to the law was passed to narrow the definition of the target group. With this amendment young people that have interrupted a youth education are not automatically eligible for admission to a School of Production. Some students might just leave one regular programme to enter another (Folketingstidende 2010). However, in addition to the previous criteria for access, the individual must demonstrate specific needs for developing both personal skills and 'readiness for education'. Aptly, the purpose of the School of Production is to strengthen the personal development of the participants and to improve possibilities for entering the regular educational system and to carry out a vocational upper secondary education (ibid.).

When the target group is defined by its marginalisation and in practice narrowed, the aims of the programmes might become harder to maintain. Within this segregated group, delimited from the diversity of working life and society, the schools may not provide an ideal laboratory for individuals to develop and prosper. The participants' fairly short stay could also constitute a hindrance, especially when the target group is increasingly characterised by lack of attainment, personal development and readiness for education: 1 year may not be sufficient to promote participation in regular upper secondary education in which access and participation is premised on the norm of normality.

### ***11.3.2 Norway: Alternative Strand of Courses with Extended Workplace Practice***

'The School for All' has been a flagship of the Norwegian school system, and the mid-1990s was considered its peak of success when Reform-94 gave all students a statutory right to a minimum of 3 years of upper secondary education and training free of charge (Welle-Strand and Tjeldvoll 2002:673). The reform reinforced integration between the general academic track and the vocational track, and thus strengthened the scholarly aspect of vocational education and training (Mjelde 2008). For students expected to fail under the higher academic achievement standards, counties across the country provide alternative pathways which in different degrees are associated with regular programmes, notably within the vocational track. Generally, this mosaic of irregular programmes, tailored to students who are not keeping pace, or drop out, provides a combination of school-based education and workplace training. A key example is 'Alternative strand of courses with



extended workplace practice'. This programme intends to retain students in school, to increase their participation and progression and to assign recognised basic competencies through adapted vocational education and training (Hernes 2010). In the following we will draw on a study of this particular programme (Ohna and Bruin 2010; Bruin and Ohna 2012).

The Norwegian government's all-inclusive policy holds that 'Education is regarded as means of promoting equity, and for reducing inequalities, poverty and other forms of marginalisation' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2008:6). Instrumental to this end, the Education Act affirms a universal right to upper secondary education based on the principle of adapted education which holds that 'Education shall be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual pupil, apprentice and training candidate' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 1998, section 1(3)). Furthermore, students who either do not or are unable to benefit satisfactorily from regular education have the right to special education (*ibid.* section 5(1)). Accordingly, the alternative courses with extended workplace practice are firmly positioned within the special education continuum. Student assignment is thus regulated by expert assessments by the Educational Psychological (Counselling) Service. The Act further requires individual subject curricula (an individual education plan, IEP) of decisions concerning contents and aims and pedagogical and didactical adaptations (*ibid.*). Pertinent to this legal framework, the alternative courses are associated with, yet deviated from, the national curriculum and the two-plus-two-year structure of the regular vocational education and training programmes. Upon completion, or when leaving the course, students are awarded a vocational training certificate, termed Documented partial competence (formerly called Competence at a lower level). This certificate allows students credits for the accomplished education and training.

How the courses operate in practice, how they are designed and carried out is a matter for the counties. School authorities and the individual schools use their ever-increasing discretionary space to develop their distinct alternative courses. The study of Alternative strand of courses with extended workplace practice drawn on in this case presentation is conducted in a county held to exemplify 'Norway in a nutshell' due to its 10 % estimate on any demographic parameter. In 2009 when the project started, alternative courses were offered at 13 of the county's 26 upper secondary schools, and these courses were linked to six of the nine regular vocational education and training programmes. The total number of students attending was 214, and about half of the student body was in their first year.

According to regional policy documents (RF 2009), the alternative courses aim at qualifying students for participation in the regular labour market as skilled or unskilled labourers or for work in sheltered workshops. The course may also qualify for entering regular programmes in upper secondary education and for future work. Further, it is stated that the courses are tailored to students who learn through practical work and who are in need of additional support beyond what is offered in regular classes. More specifically, the target group is formally designated in terms

of difficulties related to learning and social functioning (Vilbli.no 2012). At the county and school level, the students' special needs and how they disqualify for regular programmes are reflected in an extensive use of special needs labels, such as 'complex learning difficulties', 'social and emotional problems' and 'specific subject difficulties'.

To accommodate adapted education and training, the courses are organised in groups with a reduced number of students, eight at the maximum. Some courses are located at the school premises, others take place outside. Moreover, the courses are generously funded by the county administration. Per student this amounts to about three times the resources spent on regular classes.

According to the schools' account of curricular content and activities, they value their freedom to design the courses. There is widespread agreement that local autonomy and flexibility are necessary conditions for the courses' adaptability and responsiveness both to the regional labour market and to the students' situation. Nevertheless, it is apparent that school-based learning predominates. Emphasis is on developing the students' general social competence, on general school subjects and on various practical/theoretical lessons, such as drivers' education, HSE<sup>2</sup> and computer competency. Albeit the workplace is recognised as a central site for learning, the vocational elements are mainly located at the schools, in workshops and school-based enterprises. The schools emphasise their efforts to enable the students for workplace training, and as a result few students are offered workplace placement or training agreements in firms. This relegation of workplace training might suggest devaluation of course elements involving knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for specific jobs. The schools, however, point at reluctance on the part of workplaces. Lack of motivation and enabling structures constitute a hurdle when designing the courses: 'it's hard to find adequate work placement', 'firms are not interested' and 'employers are reluctant to take on any responsibility for the students' learning needs'. Either way, when it comes to workplace training, the study indicates a chasm between what is promised by the official course description and what is actually provided.

Both the county authorities and the schools strongly articulate the value of the alternative courses. The predominating justification is that the courses prevent students from leaving school. To retain students in schools trumps any consideration about vocational qualification: 'we do whatever it takes to keep the students in school', and 'we keep students in school and out of prison'. The students attending value the courses as well, albeit on different grounds. Their narratives underline processes of ascertainment; of their possibilities for learning, talents and interests; and of how experiences of being capable and competent feed into a new sense of self.

The schools' self-reporting maintains that less than 5 % of the students leave the courses. A follow-up of the students who started in 2009 provides a rather different picture. Of the 120 who started in 2009, one third has left upper secondary school 3 years later, one third has transferred to regular programmes and the remaining one

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<sup>2</sup>Health, Security, Safety and Environment.

third is still in the programme. Amongst the transferee to regular programmes one third left upper secondary within the subsequent year. This situation seems to be largely ignored by county officials and schools.

At the national level the alternative courses are contested and initiatives to reduce both the number of courses and students have been taken. Conversely, at the county level the number of courses and students attending has increased over the last years. Nevertheless, some schools question the value of the courses: 'Our students are reluctant to be associated with the alternative course – and this makes me wonder.... It is too easy to push students who don't 'function' in regular classes into the alternative courses. And these courses resemble a form of 'After school programme'. It's about removing some students from regular classes because they are a nuisance. Our students are the product of an inadequate compulsory school. Some of them finishes and enters into nothing'.

Evidently, the study of the Alternative strand of courses with extended workplace practice indicates a growing tension between the Norwegian political ideal of 'an inclusive upper secondary School for All' and the reality of programme differentiation, segregation and exclusion.

### ***11.3.3 Sweden: Introduction Programmes***

The reform of upper secondary school in Sweden included a shift in the structure of the irregular programmes. Since the early 1990s, the so-called *Individual programme* with a maximum duration of 3 years was the only alternative for students who failed to reach the required educational goals at the end of lower secondary level. In 2011, the Individual programme was replaced by five *Introduction programmes*, regulated in chapter 17 of the Swedish school law (SFS 2010:800). Due to the decentralised school system in Sweden, the actual organisation of these programmes may vary between the municipalities.

However, for both the Individual programme and the Introduction programmes, the prerequisite for enrolment is failure to fulfil the goals and pass the exams at lower secondary school. For entering the Individual programme, failure in the main subjects Swedish, Mathematics and English was the prerequisite. In the context of the new education policy, the eligible requirements for attending regular upper secondary education and training, 'the National Programme', were stipulated stricter. Today, for entering vocational programmes students have to pass 8 subjects, and for entering college preparatory programmes passing in 12 subjects is required. In the years prior to 2011, about 12 % of Swedish students did not meet these requirements. Between 8 and 9 % attended the Individual programme.

The former Individual programme was not synonymous with special needs support. Many of its participants, however, had received such help in primary school. The aim of this programme was to enable students for transition into a regular national programme. Just as its predecessor, today's Introduction programmes do not lead to graduation. As a more tailor-made education approach, they facilitate

access into and participation in a national programme or transition to employment. The Swedish National Agency of Education summarises the aims of the new programmes as follows:

The introduction programmes will give students who are not eligible for a national programme an individually adapted education, which satisfies students' different educational needs and provides adequate educational routes. The introductory programmes will lead to a firm ground on the labour market and provide a foundation, as good as possible for further education (Skolverket 2012a:30). Both students' qualification and socialisation are stressed more firmly in the goals affirmed by the new Introduction programmes.

Without questioning the upper secondary school's selection mechanism, the five Introduction programmes will result in a greater organisational differentiation of students. At present it is unclear how the homogenisation of learners – as an attempt to reduce complexity in the regular upper secondary classroom – will affect the teachers' willingness and ability to apply pedagogical differentiation.

The five Introduction programmes are (Utbildningsinfo.se & Skolverket 2011):

- Preparatory Course: This course is for students who wish to attend a national programme but lack one or several passes in the necessary basic subjects [...].
- Programme-Oriented Individual Selection – PRIV: This is for students who wish to attend a vocational programme but lack passes in one or several of the basic subjects necessary [...].
- Vocational Introduction: This course is for students who wish to attend a vocational programme but do not have the sufficient pass grades in basic subjects to qualify for PRIV or for a vocational programme [...].
- Individual Alternative: Individual Alternative is for students who would like a course in order to gain employment or to be able to study at upper secondary school. The student has none or almost none of the pass grades necessary to attend a national programme [...].
- Language Introduction: For students who recently have arrived in Sweden, and who have none of the passing grades necessary to attend a national programme and need to learn Swedish [...].

In the school year 2011–2012, almost 18 % of all first year's upper secondary school students attended an Introduction programme. This high proportion can be seen as a consequence of the new entry requirements for the regular national programmes. The largest Introduction programmes are Language Introduction (7,600 students) and Individual Alternative (5,500 students). In Vocational Introduction some 3,400 students are registered, 3,100 are in PRIV and 2,800 in the Preparatory Courses. About 1,000 young people were in nonspecified Introduction programmes. Moreover, based on statistics of the Swedish National Agency of Education (Skolverket 2012b), a correlation can be seen between the parents' educational background and the students' enrolment in an Introduction programme. Students whose parents have primary education only are overrepresented in these programmes. The same applies to students with migration background. Due to the novelty of the Introduction programmes, and apart from the above mentioned key

figures, no research on the programmes has been carried out. However, some figures on effect of the former Individual programme are known. In 2005, 44 % of the students managed to enter a regular national programme after one year (Skolverket 2007:4). Of this group, about 20 % graduated from upper secondary school 4 years later. In essence, less than 10 % of the Individual programme cohort graduated from upper secondary education.

In the last decade a number of scholars have carried out qualitative research on the Individual programme. The main focus has been on the young peoples' perception of school and education. Henriksson (2004) describes the students' experience of failure and dropout from school. The narratives reflect feelings of disillusion, shame, exclusion, low self-confidence and loneliness; the young people experienced meaninglessness and boredom. In a longitudinal study Hugo (2007) analysed the changes within the 3-year span of the Individual programme. At the beginning, based on frustrating school experiences, the students showed a negative attitude to education. Hugo identified two main factors for a change towards meaningfulness: first, the teachers' perspective on their students and the interpersonal relations between the two; second, the students' experiences of relevant adapted education. Changes within the duration of the Individual programme are also analysed in a study by Johansson (2009). Depending on the conditions and traditions at the schools, she identified how students create their identity between adaption and resistance and in relation to the educational demands. Johansson maintains that the prevalence of special support was of relevance, as well as gender, social background and ethnicity. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions has recently published a report on the best practice to reduce dropout in upper secondary education (SKL 2012). Based on interviews the study identifies five key factors to reduce dropout: 'good encounter', 'clear set goals and emphasis on results', 'appropriate programme', 'quality through co-operation and participation' and 'capacity to assess and to meet the needs of the students'. However, best practice research can be inspiring, but its limitation becomes obvious when transfer of results to another context is intended (Biesta 2007).

There is an obvious call for research on the reformed irregular programme in Sweden, especially on how the Introduction programmes affect the opportunities of young people to access and participate in a national programme or in the labour market. Moreover, it is of relevance to examine the effects on the students' self-consciousness, study motivation and co-operation competencies. Last, but not least, research is needed on what consequences inclusive approaches in primary and lower secondary schools will have on upper secondary education (Persson and Persson 2012).

## 11.4 Discussion

There is an ingrained paradox in the intent to prevent upper secondary school dropout by means of irregular programmes. In terms of the official definition, dropout denotes a person 'who is no longer at school and does not hold an upper secondary

qualification'. Students attending an irregular programme are at school; nevertheless, the moment they complete they do not hold an upper secondary qualification. Indications of some students continuing in and graduating from regular upper secondary school do not obliterate the fact that too many do not. They enter the dropout category. As long as the students are in the programme, they are kept out of the official dropout statistics. They become part of it if they leave or, for most, upon completion. Hence, the intent to prevent dropout by offering irregular programmes is short termed, of low efficacy and dubious. Moreover, considering the target group, the programmes are in peril of sustaining a social reproduction cycle of unequal access to education and social inequality. This challenge of retaining low achieving students in school whilst at the same time avoiding initiatives that might increase inequalities is addressed by Lamb (2011). He contends that '[...] there is little use providing alternatives to deal with pupil diversity if the alternatives simply function to promote stratification by working as sources of relegation and offering only weak returns'.

So, what does a cross-case reading tell us about the irregular programmes and the Nordic School for All? First, following Biesta (2009) we address how the irregular programmes correspond to the purpose of education. What impact do the programmes have on conditions concerning students' qualification, socialisation and subjectification, and are the programmes worth sustaining? Secondly, how do the irregular programmes play into the construction of an upper secondary School for All?

### ***11.4.1 The Purpose of Education in the Irregular Programmes***

The educational purpose is clearly the Achilles heel of the irregular programmes; their qualifying roles become blurred and their averred conditions for socialisation and subjectification are encapsulated by structures and discourses of inferior students. Rather than offering conditions for a 'good education', it seems fair to ask if the irregular programmes constitute 'the moment when education retracts'.

As noted, Biesta does not restrict *the qualifying role of education* to formal qualifications enabling access to employment or higher levels of education. Knowledge, experiences, insights and world views imperative for citizenship and cultural literacy apply as well and intersect with conditions for socialisation and subjectification.

The irregular programmes analysed here share a surprising feature; they do not award any formally recognised upper secondary qualifications. The Introduction programmes, in Sweden, operate as gatekeeper to regular upper secondary education by awarding the required lower secondary qualifications. However, the irregular programmes emphasise ambitions of informal qualification in terms of future prospect to enter regular upper secondary programmes, extended work experiences and citizenship. With reference to entrance to regular upper secondary, the irregular programmes have limited impact. In-between one third and half of the students

enter a regular programme. Limited information is available on number of students graduating, but the reported figures, on the Norwegian programme and on the former Individual programme in Sweden, indicate that few do. The claimed currency of work experiences from school-based workshops is contested. The interconnecting trends of a vanishing youth labour marked and rising demands for formal qualifications indicate that such work experiences might not be highly recognised by future employers.

Possible enabling conditions for citizenship and cultural literacy direct attention to the irregular programmes' processes of *socialisation* and *subjectification*. These roles are highly valued by all programmes, in particular by the Danish Schools of Production and the Norwegian courses with extended workplace practice. In school workshops students and teachers co-operate in communities of practice, and the Schools of Production aver that these experiences repudiate the students' prior school experiences of being an outsider and of being subjected to examinations and stigmatising grading. On these matters, studies of the Norwegian and of the former Individual programme in Sweden are ambiguous. Teachers assert that at school, students are reluctant to be associated with the irregular programme in Norway, whilst the students' narratives bear testimony to how experiences of being capable and able build a different sense of self. This ambiguity is captured in findings on how students create their identity between adaptation and resistance in the Individual programme.

Through the lenses of Biesta's analytical framework, processes of socialisation and subjectification insert students into 'existing ways of doing and being'. As proven throughout the reported irregular programmes, they insert students into questionable, deeply ingrained traditions and practices of school segregation, of pathologising and stigmatising student differences and of educationally impoverishing and short-changing those considered different. These structures are not obliterated by the programmes ambitions to provide conditions for students' development, growth and improvement. Rather these 'undesirable structures' of the Nordic School for All constitute the framework for critical analyses of the programmes educational worth.

#### ***11.4.2 From Irregular Programmes to Irregular Schools for All?***

The irregular programmes in Denmark, Norway and Sweden have a common backdrop. In all three countries the governments promote inclusive educational policies and flag a School for All through primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school. Official policies emphasise high-quality education for all and equality of education opportunities and link schooling to ideas of social justice and democracy. The irregular programmes, however, show that more than one policy approach might be in operation. As noted by Tisdall and Riddell (2006), whilst governments advocate inclusive education, policy approaches might in fact create new quilts of



inclusive and exclusive policies and practices, which may not meet the obligations of a School for All.

Albeit the School for All is an ambitious vision intrinsically linked to societal democratisation, a mixture of vested interests might undermine and jeopardise democratic equality. As noted in the introduction, contemporary neo-liberal tendencies call upon schools to raise standards for economic purposes. The order of the day articulated in national curricula is that competition in the global knowledge economy requires knowledgeable citizens, which in turn requires schools to put in place rigorous quality agendas and vigilant specifications and monitoring of standards through regular testing of students (Gewirtz 2000). Gewirtz asserts that these notions of quality and quality control rest on a narrow, economic instrumentalism which marginalises broader, more humanistic conceptions of quality. Schools are required to mirror the stratified and unequal structure of the market economy, and issues of equality and social justice are effectively downplayed (Gewirtz 2000; Skrtic and McCall 2010).

Following the irregular programmes in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, these mechanisms become apparent. Students who are failing under the higher standards are efficiently removed from regular programmes and channelled into irregular programmes of little or no value.

In Denmark access to upper secondary school, to a 'youth education', is non-selective. In a strongly differentiated upper secondary structure, students who allegedly need to 'develop their personal skills', need to mature or become 'ready for education' are guided into the School of Production. This programme has a maximum duration of 1 year and it invites students into the commercial landscape of production. As evidenced by statistical figures, about half of the students attending continues in regular education (upper secondary school or another educational activity), in regular or subsidised employment, whilst the other half has left school. The programme provides no formal qualifications and is an impasse to labour market and educational qualifications.

In the Norwegian non-selective structure, all students have a statutory right to upper secondary education. Yet, some students are not considered 'able', 'motivated' or 'ready' for regular programmes, and based on expert assessments, placed in Alternative strand of courses with extended workplace practice, which may last for 3–4 years. In line with the applied special education legislation and discourses, the students deviate from the norm and are classified in terms of special needs labels. The programme in itself is a dead end. Under the banner of 'student-adapted education and training', the courses seem to represent low expectations, a watered-down curriculum and surprisingly few options for workplace experiences and training. As indicated by statistical figures, some students transfer to regular programmes but a larger number leave school. To most students, the programme's curriculum, activities and assessment procedures do not provide for any vocational qualifications or educational progress.

In the Swedish selective upper secondary school, students who do not meet the required number of passed exams in lower secondary education are offered upper

secondary Introduction programmes, which might last for 3 years. The main purpose of these programmes is for students to pass the required lower secondary exams. Research suggests that this does not apply for the majority of students attending. They are left with a programme which does not have any currency within regular upper secondary school or within the labour market.

Throughout the three programmes it becomes apparent that the Nordic universal upper secondary school systems which claim to provide inclusive, high-quality education to the plurality of the student population are failing an ever increasing number of students. Some students are considered unfit for regular programmes and put at a disadvantage in irregular programmes. Meanwhile, the status quo of the regular programmes are protected and secured. Students who challenge the golden standard of the regular and its structure, content and pedagogies are rendered 'not qualified' and excluded. Against this background it is fair to ask for whose benefit the irregular programmes are developed. Drawing on Skrtic and McCalls's (2010) institutional analysis of decoupling structures in schools, the irregular programmes seem to serve as legitimating devices for the regular programmes. These programmes curb pressures for change in the regular by signalling compliance with the inclusive mandate, when in fact, no change has occurred. Rather, 'new' irregular programmes are added which are decoupled from the regular; they require no reorganisation of the regular programmes and help to maintain both their stability and legitimacy. Through such mechanisms it is argued that the irregular programmes serve the privilege of the norm setting regular programmes. Students who fail these norms are rendered educationally impoverished. In the School for All, the distinction between the normal and the special and the regular and irregular is sustained and hardened.

A return to Slee's (2011) plea for an inclusive school, in which this distinction is transcended in an irregular school where student differences are recognised, acknowledged and worked with, clearly indicates that inclusive education is a project of ongoing political struggle. Moreover, this investigation of irregular programmes bears testimony to the claim that it is ultimately regular upper secondary education circumstances that must be significantly changed if all students are to have a fair, just, responsive and inclusive education (Brantlinger 2006).

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