



“Needed and Valuable Instead of Just Being Employed”: Vocational Training, Work and Social Usefulness Regarding People with Intellectual Disability in Sweden, 1945–1989

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Abstract • The article explores the transition of Swedish students with intellectual disability (ID) into the labour market between 1945 and 1989, a period often overlooked in historical studies on special education and disability research. It analyses the concept of employability in the history of education for this marginalised group, shedding light on the justification for vocational education and on the significance of economic shifts, follow-up studies, and sheltered workshops. Drawing on ableism and pedagogical theory, it underscores qualification, socialisation and subjectification as key educational domains. Utilising professional literature and policy documents, the article suggests a broader understanding of employment creation, considering changes in the labour market and care services. From an ableist perspective, the emphasis on employability leads to a paradox. Due to the overvaluation of functionality and capability, inclusion in work life may result in reduced recognition for those who deviate from the norm.

Keywords • ableism, disability history, employment, intellectual disability, Sweden

Introduction

In many countries, employment and work are essential for being respected as an adult and an established member of society, in terms both of self-image and from the perspective of others. However, throughout modern history, people with intellectual disability (ID) or with historical categorisations that highlight deviance from the cognitive norm have been marginalised.¹ This is the case to varying extents around the globe and in many spheres of life, not least in vocational education, employment and access to the labour market. The topicality of these issues raises questions concerning the history of work opportunities for this vulnerable group of people.

However, individuals with ID are not a homogeneous group, neither historically nor today. On the one hand, the terminology used to describe this population has evolved, a process that continues to this day. The designation of the target group has shifted over time, from terms such as *idiots* to *feeble-minded*, to *mentally retarded*, and ultimately to *intellectual disability*. Although there is a degree of overlap in the descriptions of these

1 This article uses contemporary terminology concerning disability categorisations, while maintaining a critical stance through the use of quotation marks. For a deeper discussion around the problem of stigmatisations and changing categorisations, see e.g. Robert L. Schalock, “The evolving understanding of the construct of intellectual disability,” *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability* 36, no. 4 (2011); Michael L. Wehmeyer, ed., *The Story of Intellectual Disability: An Evolution of Meaning, Understanding, and Public Perception* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2013). People-first language – mainly the term “people with ID” – is used for more overarching analyses relevant to the present.

populations, medical advancements and social changes have significantly altered their composition. This includes, for example, life-saving heart surgeries for individuals with Down's syndrome, the expansion of child healthcare centres, as well as, more recently, the emergence of prenatal diagnostics. Karl Grunewald has highlighted that what was then referred to as the school for the "feeble-minded" (*sinnesslöscola*) primarily served as a school for the poor.² He demonstrated that while the total number of individuals classified as having an intellectual disability decreased during the second half of the twentieth century, the proportion of those with severe impairments increased. Crucially, the concept of educability has been defined in various ways – based on literacy, intelligence test scores, and the capacity to carry out practical tasks.³ Finally, the social stigmatisation of being "non-educable" (*obildbar*) was abolished in 1967/68. It is therefore scarcely appropriate to equate, for instance, the "feeble-minded" (*sinnesslös*) of the 1920s with persons with intellectual disability (*personer med intellektuell funktionsnedsättning*) in the 2020s. The categorisation of *intellectual disability* is used here, similarly to its historical predecessors, as an umbrella term for a heterogeneous group of people whose commonality lies, in education, in the vague assumption that they are unlikely to achieve the learning objectives of regular primary education.

Obtaining and maintaining a job has been a significant challenge for these individuals, who were perceived as deviating from societal norms. This article uses Sweden as an example of the historical development of employment and work for people with ID in a Scandinavian welfare state. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the catchy Swedish slogan *från tärande till närande* ("from debilitating to nourishing") has been a central motif in the education and care of the "feeble-minded."⁴ The idea that everyone can make their own living and thereby reduce society's costs was also a common theme in the first half of the twentieth century. If employability were a way to achieve societal inclusion, defaulting from this norm would legitimise exclusion. This perspective has deep roots in the overvaluation of work, especially in Western societies.⁵ For Sweden, as Staffan Bengtsson puts it, the "early Protestant work ethic emphasised the duty of every member of society to contribute and strive for economic independence."⁶

2 Karl Grunewald, *Från idiot till medborgare: de utvecklingsstörda historia* (Stockholm: Gothia, 2008), 289.

3 Thomas Barow, "Begreppet 'obildbar' som en social konstruktion. Teoretisk diskussion och praktisk tillämpning inom den svenska sinnesslövården under 1900-talets första hälft," in *Omsorg i förändring. En vänbok till Karl Grunewald*, ed. Olov Andersson, Thomas Barow, and Magnus Tideman (Stockholm: Intra, 2011).

4 Described in detail by Staffan Förhammar, *Från tärande till närande: handikapputbildningens bakgrund och socialpolitiska funktion i 1800-talets Sverige* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991).

5 For a broader introduction, see Radu Harald Dinu and Staffan Bengtsson, "Introduction: Disability and Labour in Modern Societies," in *Disability and Labour in the Twentieth Century: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Radu Harald Dinu and Staffan Bengtsson (London and New York: Routledge, 2023). Specifically concerning Sweden, see Thomas Barow, "Undesirable Citizens: Education, Care and Control of the 'Feeble-minded' in the Swedish Province of Malmöhus, 1900–1950," *ALTER – European Journal of Disability Research* 5, no. 2 (2011), 108.

6 Staffan Bengtsson, "For Society and the Individual: Disability and Work in Post-War Sweden," in *Disability and Labour in the Twentieth Century: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Radu Harald Dinu and Staffan Bengtsson (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).

The second half of the twentieth century is so far a largely under-researched field in Sweden's history of people with ID. However, the period from 1945 to 1989 marked the rise and heyday of the Nordic welfare state. From a broader perspective, this epoch – and the 1960s in particular – was a time of active reforms and innovations in education and social policy. In the second half of the twentieth century, the concepts of normalisation and integration developed their full strength in Sweden and beyond,⁷ driven by progressive social policies and, not least, by parental advocates as agents of civil society. The most significant organisation was the Swedish National Association for People with Intellectual Disability (*Föreningen för utvecklingsstörda barn*, FUB), founded nationally in 1956 and still an essential protagonist in advocating for the rights of this group today. As its ombudsman, Bengt Nirje formulated the principle of normalisation in the late 1960s, thereby providing an ideological foundation for the ensuing reforms.⁸ Similar developments can be observed in neighbouring northern European countries such as Denmark.⁹

Important international agreements on disability issues, including aspects of work, were reached between 1945 and 1989. At the beginning of the period, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that everyone "has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."¹⁰ The 1971 UN Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons emphasised the right to "perform productive work and engage in any meaningful occupation."¹¹ In 1982, the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons emphasised full participation, among other things, through work "provided through open employment."¹²

When considering international developments, the difficulties that people with ID face in obtaining employment appear widespread. In the United States, sheltered workshops that emerged from the 1960s onwards received significant criticism due to their "exploitative and demeaning labour practice."¹³ David Kilgannon has noted similar

⁷ Jan Tøssebro et al., "Normalization Fifty Years Beyond: Current Trends in the Nordic Countries," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 9, no. 2 (2012).

⁸ For the development of FUB and the normalisation principle, see Olov Andersson, *Några trådar i FUB-väven: om Riksförbundet för utvecklingsstörda barn, ungdomar och vuxna, FUB, från 1950-tal till 1980-tal* (Halmstad: Högskolan Halmstad, Wigforssgruppen för välfärdsforskning, 2002); Thomas Barow, "Sveriges väg till integrering. Bengt Nirje och Karl Grunewald, två 'pionjärer' i specialpedagogik i norra Europa, om eugenik, mentalitetsförändringar och normalisering," *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Spesialpedagogikk* 81, no. 3 (2003); Thomas Barow, "Normaliseringens uppkomst och tidig utveckling i Sverige," *Handicaphistorisk Tidsskrift* 28 (2012).

⁹ Comprehensively delineated by Birgit Kirkebæk in *Normaliseringens periode: dansk åndssvageforsorg 1940–1970 med særligt fokus på forsøgsschef N.E. Bank-Mikkelsen og udviklingen af Statens Åndssvageforsorg 1959–1970* (Holte: SOCPOL, 2001).

¹⁰ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", § 23, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

¹¹ United Nations, "Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons", <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/RightsOfMentallyRetardedPersons.aspx>

¹² United Nations, "World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons", <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/world-programme-of-action-concerning-disabled-persons.html>.

¹³ Jordan A. Conrad, "On Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in the United States: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 24, no. 1 (2020), 96.

developments in Ireland and England – the establishment of sheltered workshops in the 1960s and the intense criticism that followed. These institutions contributed only to a minimal extent to integration into the open labour market.¹⁴ In other countries, such as Malta, employment opportunities were not available to people with ID, and day services only began to emerge in the 1970s.¹⁵

Developments in the respective countries must be understood within their specific national contexts. In the case of Sweden, historical research can help foster a deeper understanding of the situation of people with ID in relation to the development of the Nordic welfare state. These people were often marginalised in many respects, not least regarding the labour market.¹⁶ Their employability was a crucial motif behind the 2013 curriculum reform for school pupils with ID.¹⁷ At the same time, presenting and analysing Swedish developments opens up the possibility of international historical comparison and is relevant to a global audience. By doing so, the role played by work and employment for a group of socially marginalised people should become clear, together with what approaches were pursued to mitigate the consequences of this marginalisation, if not to overcome it entirely.

Aim of the study and research questions

This article outlines and analyses the significance of employability and work in Sweden's education and social history concerning young people with ID. The research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of employment perspectives for a vulnerable group of young people in the Swedish welfare state. In this context, the article addresses the arguments that justify vocational education for pupils with ID. Moreover, it discusses the impact of a changing economy and the significance of follow-up studies and sheltered workshops. To achieve these objectives, two overarching research questions were formulated:

1. What were the central motives concerning work and employment underlying the education of young people with ID and their transition from youth to adulthood?
2. What continuities and changes can be identified in Swedish society during the researched period regarding the creation of work and employment opportunities for people with ID?

¹⁴ David Kilgannon, *Intellectual Disability and Ireland, 1947–1996: Towards A Full Life?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023).

¹⁵ Anne-Marie Callus, Isabel Bonello, and Brian Micallef, "Advocacy and Self-Advocacy in Malta: Reflections on the Lives of Maltese People with Intellectual Disability from the 1950s to the Present Day," *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 50, no. 2 (2022).

¹⁶ See Jessica Arvidsson, *Sysselsättning och social rättvisa: en nationell registerstudie om 12269 unga vuxna med intellektuell funktionsnedsättning* (Halmstad: Högskolan i Halmstad, 2016); Hege Gjertsen, Stefan Hardonk, and Jens Ineland, "Work Inclusion for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Three Nordic Countries: The Current Policy and Challenges," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 23, no. 1 (2021); Helena Taubner and Renee Luthra, "Meaningful Occupation for Adults with Intellectual Disability," In *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Disability*, ed. Gabriel Bennett and Emma Goodall (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

¹⁷ See SOU 2011:8. *Den framtida gymnasiesärskolan: en likvärdig utbildning för ungdomar med utvecklingsstörning: betänkande* (Gymnasiesärskoleutredningen. Stockholm: Fritze, 2011).

Historical research about the working situation of people with ID in Sweden

Previous historical research on people with ID mainly focuses on the years before 1945. As a crucial part of the emerging social disability research, the development of institutions for the "feeble-minded," primarily boarding schools, care homes and work homes, was examined for the first half of the twentieth century. Based on the ambition of the 1960s and 1970s to eliminate large special institutions for people with ID, the historical development of the first half of the twentieth century is outlined from a critical perspective. According to Mårten Söder, "resigned pessimism" took over in the first decades of the twentieth century, and planning focused on "life-long institutional care."¹⁸ However, recent research on the interwar period has instead emphasised a "new type of optimism characterised by rationalism and a positivistic belief in progress."¹⁹ From this perspective, employability and the ability to work were common themes in the efforts of educators and social administrators throughout the first half of the twentieth century, based on both the motif of reducing costs and benefiting the individual. Some follow-up studies on the post-school development of the "feeble-minded" have been conducted, and it was mainly increased demand for labour that made it easier for this group of people to be employed.²⁰ However, many worked in the sheltered environment of institutions such as boarding schools or working homes, keeping expenditure low for the public or private operators. In the first half of the twentieth century, attempts were made to establish controlled family care (*kontrollerad familjevård*) by placing school leavers from boarding schools for the "feeble-minded," for example, as a cheap labour force on farms. Only a small number of people were accommodated in this way.²¹

A study on the southern Swedish province of Malmöhus highlighted the utilitarian motif in the education and care system and concluded that everybody "had to be productive and socially useful."²² This attitude found its expression in the acceptance and approval of sterilisation practices as a robust social policy towards an undesirable group of people.²³ Mainly in the 1940s, sterilisation as a form of social control promoted a "normal" life for people categorised as "feeble-minded." The connection between education and eugenics has deep roots in Swedish society and has been extensively researched.²⁴

18 Mårten Söder, *Anstalter för utvecklingsstörda: en historisk-sociologisk beskrivning av utvecklingen*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Ala, 1984), 103; all translations by the author.

19 Barow (2011), 114.

20 Söder (1984); Judith Areschoug, *Det sinnesslöa skolbarnet: undervisning, tvång och medborgarskap 1925–1954* (Linköping: Linköpings universitet, 2000); Thomas Barow, *Kein Platz im Volksheim? Die "Schwachsinnigenfürsorge" in Schweden 1916–1945* (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 2009); Thomas Barow, "Övergång från skola till arbete i ett historiskt perspektiv: den svenska 'sinnesslövården' under 1900-talets första hälft," *Vägval i skolans historia* 1 (2015).

21 Barow (2009), 186–90.

22 Barow (2011), 113.

23 Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tydén, "Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care," In *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland*, 2nd ed., ed. Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, 77–149 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005).

24 Some examples for this connection: Areschoug (2000), 225–59; Broberg and Tydén (2005); Barow (2009), 203–84; Barow (2011), 111–13; Emma Vikström, *Skapandet av den nya människan: eugenik och pedagogik i Ellen Keys författarskap* (Örebro: Örebro universitet, 2021).

Abuse of power is a research topic in Kristina Engwall's dissertation about Västra Mark, the state-run mental hospital founded in 1931 for "anti-social imbecile" women in Örebro.²⁵ As in some other places, occupational therapy was used as part of the disciplining care system to minimise operating costs. In the case of the 1960s, Engwall reports on work opportunities for some inmates at hotels and restaurants in the nearest town. These employment opportunities suggest a shift in the care approach.

A contemporary witness published a comprehensive presentation of the history of people with ID in Sweden. Karl Grunewald, who held leading administrative positions in the field from 1961 to 1986, reveals a growing number of places in working homes (*arbetshem*) between 1940 (2,000 places) and 1964 (3,400 places), followed by a rapid decline in the following years (1967: 800 places).²⁶ According to Grunewald, working homes were viewed as outdated and redundant in the late 1960s, and they were either closed or converted into care homes in 1968. The same author reported a lack of staff training and even some assaults in working homes in the 1940s. For the 1960s and 1970s, Grunewald also points to some cases of exploitation and inhumane treatment in controlled family care.²⁷

In summary, historical research on people with ID in Sweden, particularly concerning work and employment, is more comprehensive for the first half of the twentieth century than for the second half. To date, the period between the historical turning points of 1945 and 1989 has been largely overlooked. This research gap demands historical analyses that focus on the reform of the education and care system in general, and on specific aspects of work in particular. This article may contribute to filling this gap, thereby demonstrating the gradual change of the welfare system. This research emphasises educational purposes, the contextual factors of societal development and the institutional responses that emerge from them. Not least for the present and future, this includes an opportunity to reflect on the significance of work and social participation.

Theoretical orientation

Two theoretical approaches inspire this research. Regarding aspects of education, the study draws on Gert Biesta's three domains of education, providing a framework for the crucial question concerning the purpose of educational efforts. The article further refers to ableism through the theoretical lens of disability studies.

Three domains of education

In recent years, Biesta has raised the crucial question of the purpose of education.²⁸ He distinguishes between three domains: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification focuses on providing learners "with the knowledge, skills and

²⁵ Kristina Engwall, *Asociala och imbecilla: kvinnorna på Västra Mark 1931–1967* (Örebro: Örebro universitet, 2000).

²⁶ Grunewald (2008), 355.

²⁷ Grunewald (2008), 362.

²⁸ Gert Biesta, "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21, no. 33 (2009), 33–46; Gert Biesta, "Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited," *Educational Theory* 70, no. 1 (2020), 89–104.

understanding and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgement."²⁹ Socialisation describes the "ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political 'orders."³⁰ Finally, subjectification deals "with the existence of the child or student as a subject of her or his own life."³¹ Against this background, this historical exploration uses Biesta's systematisation to identify the alignment expressed in contemporary publications, focusing on people with ID. This attempt will help to clarify the educational goals of professionals for this specific group of young people.

Ableism

During recent decades, mainly influenced by the development of disability studies, the term ableism has emerged in the scientific debate on disability. Several meanings exist, varying in their respective societal underpinnings.³² Kathleen R. Bogart and Dana S. Dunn suggest a comprehensive definition: "*Ableism is stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities.*"³³ Fundamentally, the ableism perspective questions the societal dominance of functionality and performance capabilities. Lisa Stafford draws on the economic value that "is predicated on ableist 'normative' body-mind requirements declared to be productive in meeting deemed working rates set for profit by economic systems."³⁴ People who cannot fulfil these norms are seen as burdens and misfits. However, ableism occurs not only in the form of direct discrimination or other humiliations but also, for example, as hostile and benevolent ableism.³⁵ In this research, the ableism lens contributes to analysing contemporary standpoints regarding employment and work for people with ID.

Methods

This study seeks to explore various levels of historical development. It is premised on the assumption that such a multi-perspectival approach contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding work and employment for individuals with ID during an innovative phase in the development of the welfare state. To this end, three source types are analysed: green papers, publications by the FUB parents' association, and scientific studies from the period in question. These sources are publicly available and were accessed through the Swedish national database, Libris, and the University of Gothenburg's *Supersök* database. Search terms included standard Swedish expressions

29 Biesta (2009), 39.

30 Biesta (2009), 40.

31 Biesta (2020), 89.

32 For an introduction, see Dan Goodley, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Lisa Stafford, "Disrupting Ableism in Social Work Pedagogy with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Critical Disability Theory," In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Pedagogies for Social Work*, ed. Christine Morley et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

33 Kathleen R. Bogart and Dana S. Dunn, "Ableism Special Issue Introduction," *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 3 (2019), 651; *italics in the original.*

34 Stafford (2020), 362.

35 Michelle R. Nario-Redmond, Alexia A. Kemerling, and Arielle Silverman, "Hostile, Benevolent, and Ambivalent Ableism: Contemporary Manifestations," *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 3 (2019), 726–56.

for ID, as well as older terminology, such as “feeble-minded” and “mental retardation” (for example, *sinesslö*, *utvecklingsstörd*, *utvecklingshämmed*, along with their respective nominal forms). An analysis of archival materials, while undoubtedly attractive, would have exceeded the scope of this study.

The green papers, known in Sweden as *statens offentliga utredningar* (SOU), are of particular interest as they occupy the intersection between political and professional discourse. At the same time, they constitute a boundary for more narrowly defined political debates, such as those reflected in parliamentary discussions or white papers, which, due to space constraints, are not included in this study. Many SOUs were produced during the study period, reflecting intensive reform activity.

The publications of the FUB parents’ organisation provide insight into the perspective of an advocacy group. This is relevant because their views were, at the time, only just beginning to gain public visibility. Nevertheless, the available source material from FUB remains limited in this context. A comprehensive historical account of this advocacy organisation, particularly one based on archival records, remains a task for future research.

The third group of sources consists of professional publications from the period under review. In particular, a Nordic professional journal that underwent several name changes was examined: *Nordisk tidsskrift for åndssvageforsorg* (until 1959), *Psykisk utvecklingshemning: Nordisk tidsskrift for åndssvageforsorg* (1960–1961), *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* (1962–1987), and *PU-bladet* (from 1988). Moreover, some research reviews³⁶ and rare existing dissertations and course literature from the 1960s onwards were examined closely.

The selection criterion for all sources has been the thematic classification of publications in vocational training, employment and work. The results are based on a thematic analysis³⁷ that leads to five major topics. These topics form the structure of the following section.

Results

The results of the literature research reveal that the post-school situation of people with ID, their employment and their working life, has been a continuous topic throughout all decades. At the same time, constant marginalisation in the labour market has affected this group of people.

³⁶ These included: Niilo Mäki, “Den pedagogiska-psykologiska forskningen,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 66, no. 1 (1964); Ingrid Liljeroth, “Översikt över sociologisk forskning,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 66, no. 1 (1964); Lars Kebbon and Cecilia Wändell, *Nordisk forskning om mental retardation 1960–1973: en inventering. I. Beteendevetenskaplig forskning* (Stockholm: Socialstyrelsens byrå för omsorger om utvecklingsstörda, 1974); Lars Kebbon and Karin Sonnander, *Nordisk forskning om mental retardation 1974–1979: en bibliografi* (Uppsala: Psykologiska enheten, Forskningskliniken, Ulleråkers sjukhus, 1982); Karin Sonnander and Lars Kebbon, *Nordisk forskning om mental retardation 1980–1985: En bibliografi* (Uppsala: Projekt Mental retardation, Ulleråkers sjukhus, 1987); Anders Gustavsson and Mårten Söder, *Social forskning om mänskor med psykisk utvecklingsstörning: en bibliograferad kommentar* (Stockholm: Rektorsämbetet, Utbildningsförvaltningen, 1990).

³⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2022).

Education and employability between social control and personal development

In almost every decade (1946, 1957, 1968, 1973 and 1990), the school authorities have implemented curricula for a group of pupils not eligible for regular education. All documents contained some passages on practical training and skills, transition and work. However, until the introduction of the Swedish Care Law (*omsorgslagen*) in 1967/68, a distinction existed between young people categorised as being educable and non-educable. Assumed future employability was crucial in arguing for why education is meaningful, even for pupils with limited knowledge of reading, writing and mathematics. In a keynote speech in 1946, Ragnhild Jungner, the state inspector for the education of the “feeble-minded,” emphasised the need to establish “manual” study programmes for children seen as “developable and receptive for practical education.”³⁸ She demanded that these children “learn to work with their hands and become practically fit.”³⁹ An alignment between individual and societal interests characterises her perspective on education:

We want to make the children viable and socially adapted. Therefore, we aim to bring them back to life. We want to make them fulfil a simple place in society. We strive to teach them such an attitude and decency that they should not deviate too strongly in their encounter with others. However, first and foremost, we want to make them happy, satisfied and happy people.⁴⁰

At that time, most educational institutions for the “feeble-minded” were organised as boarding schools. However, a state committee on the care of this group saw education as an opportunity to “save many feeble-minded” from living in institutions.⁴¹ The committee report warned that a lack of control could lead to “indolence and asociality.”⁴²

After the 1950s, external schools – where pupils lived in their parents’ homes – were seen as an alternative to boarding schools, particularly concerning future employment. Research from the early 1960s highlighted that pupils in external schools were “superior in the question of social maturity.”⁴³ According to that research, social development is essential to “succeed in society and working life.”⁴⁴ This contemporary research critiqued the existing boarding schools and conveyed a pronounced developmental optimism. The era of boarding schools was coming to an end.

The late 1950s and early 1960s were periods characterised by tension between preservation and reform. Education played a crucial role in shaping future employment opportunities. Jungner’s successor as state inspector in the central school administration, Lennart Wessman, promoted external schools. He was convinced that, through

38 Ragnhild Jungner, “Synpunkter på sinnesslöundervisningen,” *Nordisk tidskrift for Åndssvageforsorg* 50 (1948), 94.

39 Jungner (1948), 94.

40 Jungner (1948) 86; italics in the original.

41 SOU 1949:11. *Betänkande om sinnesslövården: 1946 års Sinnesslövårdsutredning*. Stockholm: SOU, 1949, 107.

42 SOU 1949:11, 127.

43 Stig Nordström, “En jämförande undersökning av externat- och internatundervisade särskoleelever,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 64, no. 1–2 (1962), 33.

44 Nordström (1962), 33.

the “right education,” these “mentally retarded” young people could become “fully adapted to the social life of society, self-sustaining and without the need for special support.”⁴⁵ At the same time, he admitted that young people with such impairments needed employment in sheltered environments and, “in many cases,” placement in boarding homes. However, Wessman highlighted the significance of jobs: “Our pupils and patients become more harmonious if they do regular work, work that makes them feel useful and receive a wage for their effort.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the green paper preparing the Care Law of 1967/68 emphasised the objective that pupils should be “placed in the open market or sheltered occupation”⁴⁷ after graduating, and that an increasing focus on that field would be necessary. However, a state report on vocational training imposed strict limitations. A “placement in the normal department of an ordinary vocational school [...] appears unrealistic given the nature of the disability and should not occur.”⁴⁸ According to another green paper entitled *Bättre utbildning för handikappade* (“Better education for the handicapped”), courses, training, job measures and adaptations contributed to “eliminating the handicap.”⁴⁹ What becomes evident here is the compensatory approach that characterised the welfare measures of that period.

Another decade later, and the focus changed once again. For one thing, the emphasis was placed more clearly on the personal development of people with ID. On the other hand, the relationship between the individual and the restricting environment became a subject of discussion. A publication from the FUB parents’ organisation illustrates this change. This influential advocacy group emphasised the right to work and provided examples of personal development through employment. They suggested better teacher education and fruitful cooperation between regular and special schools. “Work in the regular labour market should always be the goal.”⁵⁰ Complex measures were therefore needed: adult education, workplace adaptations, appropriate work tasks, employer responsibility, occupational health services, and trade union commitment. Professionals also concluded that “vocational education increases opportunities for employment for the mentally handicapped.”⁵¹

In the years to come, FUB continued its lobbying, among other things, by publishing brochures on this issue.⁵² In the preface of one of these publications, the FUB vice chair summed things up in easy language:

45 Lars Wessman, “Rehabilitering: Diskussionsinlägg,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 66, no. 2 (1964), 5.

46 Wessman (1964), 5.

47 SOU 1966:9. *Omsörger om psykiskt utvecklingshämmade: Betänkande av särskilt tillkallad utredningsman* (Stockholm: SOU, 1966), 81.

48 SOU 1966:3. *Yrkesutbildningsberedningen. Yrkesutbildningen. I* (Stockholm: SOU, 1966), 335.

49 SOU 1969:35. *Bättre utbildning för handikappade: Förslag av Handikapputredningen* (Stockholm: SOU, 1969), 90.

50 Riksförbundet FUB. *Utbildning och träning ... för vad? Om rätten till arbete, även för utvecklingsstörda!* (Stockholm: FUB, 1978), 23.

51 Berit Nordfors and Gösta Nordfors, “Vocational Education and Vocational Adjustment,” In *The Mentally Handicapped: Towards Normal Living*, ed. Karl Grunewald (London: Hutchinson of London, 1978), 199.

52 Riksförbundet FUB, ed. *Jobbet: en skrift om 17 arbetsplatser i Sverige* (Stockholm: FUB, 1989); Riksförbundet FUB, ed. *17 jobb: en idéskrift* (Stockholm: FUB, 1989).

Many of those who are handicapped are craving for a job in a workplace. [...] Handicapped people have shown that they can do many things. [...] This writing contains the stories of lucky people who have had the chance and know how it feels to be needed and valuable instead of just being employed.⁵³

At the end of the researched period, however, it became clear that the objective of getting jobs in the open labour market had not yet been achieved. Meanwhile, research criticised special schools, not least for normalising the exclusion of young people with ID from the labour market.⁵⁴ It also became apparent that goodwill in the form of reform-oriented education and welfare was insufficient to create work opportunities.

Work – in the best interests of the individual and of society

The objective of the Swedish welfare system for the entire period from 1945 to 1989 was to enable people with ID to work. There was an outspoken ambition that they could make their own living. Despite this continuity, some fundamental changes in motivation and social context exist. There was a continual alteration of the role of people with ID, from being objects of care towards self-determination over their lives. These changes were embedded in the reform-oriented social policy of the 1960s and 1970s. The context was the closure of boarding homes. For example, an article on the "Right to appropriate work and employment" suggested "getting as many out of the institutions as possible."⁵⁵ Establishing "a society for all" became the objective, as the emerging disability movement and social administrators expressed it.⁵⁶

At the beginning of the examined period, 2,245 places existed in working homes for the "feeble-minded." These places were, whenever possible, separated by gender. About half of these homes were in public ownership, and the other half in private ownership. Contemporary social policy assumes that "many feeble-minded need to live in boarding homes throughout their lives."⁵⁷ However, some of those people lived in controlled family care, often on farms. Economic incentives motivated this policy. Fewer places were needed in working homes, and "society gets the direct opportunity to take advantage of the working capability of the feeble-minded."⁵⁸

Working homes existed until the mid-1960s for other vulnerable groups, for example alcoholics and patients from mental hospitals. A green paper from the late 1940s criticised the lack of differentiation concerning the inmates. According to this report, work and occupation were an essential function in the field of intervention:

53 Gudrun Sandström, "Gå till Arbetsförmedlingen," In *Jobbet: en skrift om 17 arbetsplatser i Sverige*, ed. Riksförbundet FUB (Stockholm: FUB, 1989), 4.

54 Jerry Rosenqvist, *Undervisning om arbete i särskolan. Analys av lektioner på grundsärskolans högstadium* (Malmö: Lärarhögskolan, 1989).

55 Gudrun Hådell, "Rätt till adekvat arbete och sysselsättning," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 4 (1969), 18.

56 Bengt-Olof Mattsson, "Utvecklingen i Sverige," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 78, no. 2 (1976), 29.

57 SOU 1949:11, 135.

58 SOU 1949:11, 75.

However, occupational therapy is a necessary part of the treatment of all psychopathological clients. It can improve the clientele's mental health and well-being within certain limits and contribute to social adjustment.⁵⁹

A considerable change had already occurred by the first half of the 1960s, with inspiration coming not least from abroad. In 1963, the professional journal *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* published articles from the Netherlands and England on modernised approaches to labour integration for people with ID.⁶⁰ A disability activist from the FUB parent organisation described work as a human right. The concept of normalisation – established first in Denmark and then in Sweden – viewed work as a “normal routine of the day”⁶¹

The new approach became apparent, for example, in a green paper on coordinated rehabilitation. It emphasised that everybody should have the opportunity to “live in social and cultural community with others and to make productive efforts.”⁶² The education of “some mentally retarded” people should be “increasingly directed towards temporal-oriented work of various kinds, in industry and elsewhere.”⁶³ Similarly, a decade later, psychologists Lars Kebbon and Cecilia Wändell saw opportunities for a “more independent life and productive efforts”⁶⁴ in society. The double motivation of personal development and societal advantages also exists in the reasoning of Rikard Palmer in his PhD thesis: “The mentally retarded person who can earn his livelihood gains respect in his own eyes and the eyes of others and also relieves society of considerable expense.”⁶⁵

The reform-oriented social policy of the 1970s led to the establishment of the Employment Committee, which facilitated the implementation of *Arbete åt alla* (“Work for all”), as outlined in the green paper SOU 1975:90. The committee’s comprehensive work led to numerous green papers, including SOU 1978:14 on *Arbete åt handikappade* (“Work for the Handicapped”).⁶⁶ The committee suggested subsidised wages as a response to the difficulties people with ID face in finding jobs on the open market.

The professional literature of the 1970s considered individual aspects, for example, personal interests and satisfaction. Based on individual assessment, a hierarchy of

59 SOU 1949:11, 200.

60 For the Netherlands, see A. Meuzelaar, “Arbetsmuligheter for de psykisk utviklingshemmede,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 65, no. 3 (1963), 3–18; for England see H. C. Gunzburg, “Nye synspunkter på den sosiale og arbeidsmessige opplæring og trening av psykisk utviklingshemmede,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 65, no. 3 (1963), 19–40.

61 Bengt Nirje, “The Normalization Principle and Its Human Management Implications”, In *Changing Patterns in Residential Services for the Mentally Retarded*, ed. Robert B. Kugel and Wolf Wolfensberger (Washington, DC: President’s committee on mental retardation, 1969), 182.

62 SOU 1964:50. *Samordnad rehabilitering. Del I: Remissyttranden över och kommentarer till CRB:s PM 1962 med riktlinjer för den allmänna rehabiliteringsorganisationen* (Stockholm: SOU, 1964), 20.

63 SOU 1964:50, 153.

64 Kebbon and Wändell (1974), 9.

65 Rikard Palmer, *Prediction of Work Performance and Work Adjustment in Mentally Retarded Adults* (Uppsala: Scandinavian University Books, 1974), 1.

66 SOU 1975:90, *Arbete åt alla: Delbetänkande från Sysselsättningsutredningen* (Stockholm: SOU, 1975); SOU 1978:14, *Arbete åt handikappade: Betänkande av Sysselsättningsutredningen* (Stockholm: SOU, 1978).

solutions according to individual capabilities was favoured: open market, semi-protected, protected, or daily activity centre.⁶⁷ The aim was to pave the way for the “greatest possible social independence in a productive community”⁶⁸, as expressed by educational practitioners Berit Nordfors and Gösta Nordfors. For the very first time, ID was associated with positive stereotypes – something that, in itself, may be understood as an indication of broader societal change:

Most mentally handicapped persons possess valuable qualities such as friendliness, carefulness, loyalty and willingness to work, which in many cases may wholly or partly compensate for their mental handicap.⁶⁹

The authors proposed assistants and vocational advisers, suggesting that many people could work in the open labour market. However, Nordfors and Nordfors did not question the norm of social usefulness. They considered “mental handicap” to be an impairment that requires compensation.

The challenge of labour market changes

Over the twentieth century, Sweden transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial and, ultimately, a service-based society. Developing work opportunities for people with ID reflected these fast and dynamic changes. Until the 1950s, employment opportunities in the agricultural sector were limited to simple manual work and household services. In particular, the working homes and boarding schools for the “feeble-minded” needed cheap labour, often recruited from their alumni. As long as a labour shortage existed, there were good opportunities to “place pupils in work under controlled conditions.”⁷⁰ Industrial work was considered too demanding, while agricultural work had a “therapeutic purpose.”⁷¹

Under the terms of industrialisation, “placement opportunities for the handicapped are nowadays very meagre.”⁷² As adaptations in industry were seen as exceptionally appropriate, sheltered workshops and activity centres emerged. However, a crucial issue was the employees’ income. While some considered industrial work as a chance for fair wages, others were more vigilant and demanded a “normalisation of remuneration for the work performed.”⁷³

Since the 1960s, the labour market has changed in terms of mechanisation, automation and specialisation. Better transport connections have made occupations away from home easier. In return, everyone should be seen as “distinctive in terms of assets,

67 Stiftelsen ALA, *Habilitering av psykiskt utvecklingsstörrda* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1975), 66.

68 Nordfors and Nordfors (1978), 17.

69 Nordfors and Nordfors (1978), 197.

70 Börje Fridholm, “Redogörelse rörande elever avgångna från statens uppfostringsanstalt Salboheds under åren 1923–1949,” *Nordisk tidskrift för Åndssvageforsorg* 54 (1952), 55.

71 Stig Ekelund, “Sysselsättning vid vårdanstalterna – ett diskussionsinlägg,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 65, no. 4 (1963), 61.

72 Wessman, 1964, 6.

73 Karl Grunewald, “Normaliseringsprincipen och omsorgerna om de utvecklingshämmade,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 74, no. 2 (1972), 45.

wishes, interests and conditions,”⁷⁴ as a green paper on the education of people with disability suggested.

Towards the end of the 1970s, however, optimism gave way to a more sober evaluation. The FUB parents’ organisation bemoaned hindrances, for example rejecting societal attitudes, employers’ prejudices, rationalisations, and performance pressure. According to this group, increasing job opportunities in public services did not lead to more jobs for people with ID. Employment opportunities for this specific group could not keep pace with the transformation of the world of work. FUB applied neoliberal reasoning: “Employment protection protects those who have a job but does not increase the propensity to employ.”⁷⁵ Moreover, people with ID would avoid contact with employment services. The FUB named workplace adaptations, support measures and job counselling as possible areas for improvement. In their statement, the latter concept of supported employment is already casting its shadow.

The tradition of follow-up studies

For the entire researched period, and with roots in the first half of the twentieth century, professionals have been interested in the outcomes of education, particularly employment status, housing conditions and civil status. Such examinations partly functioned to evaluate educational efforts and partly to justify specific policies. The boundary between these approaches is often challenging to identify. In view of the varying research methods, a comparison over time is scarcely possible. Irrespective of this limitation, these studies reveal the specific objectives of education and care.

At the beginning of the examined period, *Skolöverstyrelsen*, the central school administration, analysed statistical data from almost 1,800 pupil records from all over Sweden.⁷⁶ The investigation covered pupils who attended special schools for the “feeble-minded” between 1936 and 1946. About one third of the alumni were autonomous, with their own income; one third were partially self-sustaining; and the remaining third depended on support. It became evident that young men had better employment opportunities than women, resulting in better income. Generally, young people who lived in their parents’ homes performed better than those from boarding schools. Subsequently, the scarce scholarly literature in the field received this study positively.⁷⁷ A regional study in a south-eastern Swedish province yielded similar results regarding employment status and the gender gap.⁷⁸

State inspector Lennart Wessman conducted another comprehensive study some years later, focusing on alumni from special schools for the “feeble-minded” born between 1935 and 1939. The empirical material was based on almost 2,000 questionnaires. About half of the young men and a quarter of the young women were self-suf-

⁷⁴ SOU 1969:35, 88.

⁷⁵ FUB (1978), 7.

⁷⁶ Ragnhild Jungner, “Vad blir det av våra barn?” in *Förhandlingar vid femtonde allmänna svenskasinnesslövårdsmötet i Göteborg 3–7 augusti 1950* (Uddevalla: Allmänna svenska föreningen för vården om sinnesslöa och fallandesjuka, 1952), 37–59.

⁷⁷ Hans Forssman and Ingemar Olow, *De psykiskt utvecklingsstörda, deras utbildning och vård*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Läromedelsförlagen, Svenska bokförlaget, 1961), 80.

⁷⁸ Lina Ribbing, “Särskolevers arbetsanpassning – en efterundersökning,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 65, no. 1 (1963), 15–22.

ficient. Wessman concluded that the alumni "still have a low standard of living in our country."⁷⁹ The clear ambition was to improve this situation.

Several authors quoted Wessman's study in the following years or referred to other, often small-scale and locally limited, research.⁸⁰ The results were similar: specific percentages of the alumni had a job, either partly on the open market, or partly in a sheltered or semi-sheltered environment. Some others were without any occupation. Even the gender gap, which indicated better job opportunities for men than for women, persisted over time. Another study on three cohorts of "mental retarded" alumni, born between 1944 and 1946 in Stockholm, revealed that one fifth had a job on the open market, almost one fourth were in a sheltered workshop, one fourth were in occupational therapy, and the others were not in employment, had died or been released from the care register.⁸¹

The last sizeable empirical follow-up study in the researched period focused on one province in central Sweden, examining the situation of 255 alumni who left special schools between 1975 and 1985.⁸² According to the author, the data indicated a decreasing number of young people with ID who could get jobs in the open labour market. Moreover, fewer young people were without any occupation.

At the end of the period, in the late 1980s, experts and researchers estimated that only around 10–17 per cent of former pupils from special schools secured jobs on the open market.⁸³ Employment in the labour market is an exception acknowledged in professional literature.⁸⁴ Many alumni remain dependent on occupations in activity centres and on social support. They are marginalised in many ways, not least concerning their status in the labour market. A striking result is the continuity of the disadvantaged position of women with ID, mirroring intersectional marginalisation based on gender and cognitive deviance.

Sheltered workshops – the institutional response of industrial society

When Sweden developed into an industrial society in the mid-twentieth century, work opportunities for people with ID changed significantly. The working homes, which focused on agriculture and handicrafts, closed in the 1960s without any documented resistance. Instead, sheltered workshops emerged. Green papers from the mid-1960s

79 Lars Wessman, "Efterundersökning av särskolelever," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 66, no. 4 (1965), 19.

80 See Lars Kebbon, "Vilka skrivs ut från sjukhus för utvecklingshämmade?" *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 4 (1969), 31–36; Anna-Liss Åkesson, "Uppföljning av elever som genomgått särskolan," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 72, no. 4 (1970), 53–60; Inga Sommarström, "Efterundersökning av elever i folkhögskolekurs," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 72, no. 1 (1970), 16–23; Nordfors and Nordfors (1978); Riksförbundet FUB, *Utbildning och träning ... för vad? Om rätten till arbete, även för utvecklingsstörda!* (Stockholm: FUB, 1978).

81 Gunnar Klackenberg, "Vart tar de vägen?" *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 3 (1969), 12–21.

82 Karin Sonnander, *Ungdomar med särskolebakgrund: En uppföljning av tio årskullar med avseende på arbete och sysselsättning* (Uppsala: Projekt Mental retardation, Institutionen för psykiatri, Ulleråkers sjukhus, 1990).

83 Karl Grunewald, "Sverige," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 89, no. 3 (1987), 41; Jerry Rosenqvist, *Särskolan i ett arbetsmarknadsperspektiv: om lärares och handledares uppfattningar av arbete och elevernas framtid i arbetslivet* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), 55.

84 Åsa Eriksson-Ahnfelt, "Jobb i stallet," *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 89, no. 3 (1987), 24–28.

and early 1970s strongly emphasised the need to create employment opportunities for people with ID.⁸⁵ In 1964, the FUB established the foundation *Anpassning till Liv och Arbete* (ALA, Adaptation to Life and Work) and initiated a sheltered workshop in Uppsala in 1967. In the same year, 34 new institutions had popped up all over Sweden.⁸⁶ Accompanying research, mainly focusing on work psychology and organisational aspects, aimed to optimise employment conditions.⁸⁷ For the first time, issues regarding an adapted work environment and the well-being of workers were raised.

According to Wessman, sheltered workshops were an alternative to employment on the open market, mainly for “mentally retarded” people who “for some reason, often lacking the capacity for social adaptation, cannot be placed within our complicated social machinery.”⁸⁸ As professional literature shows, a broad consensus existed on the meaningfulness of sheltered workshops in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸⁹

Conceptually, these new institutions were closely linked to the idea of normalisation. The functional separation between living and working was a crucial aspect. Consequently, industrial areas were the place for sheltered workshops. They were “distinctive institutions that stand between traditional healthcare institutions and general, productive companies.”⁹⁰ The aim was to facilitate the transition from sheltered employment to the open labour market.⁹¹ In contrast, as another new institution type, the daily activity centres were conceptualised with a more distinctive therapeutic approach, offering occupations to their clients.⁹²

Regardless of the objective of encouraging transfer into the regular labour market, most employees remained in the sheltered workshops. In 1980, the system of sheltered workshops was centralised into a foundation (*Samhällsföretag*) and regional offices in every Swedish province.⁹³ Later, in 1992, this foundation became a corporate group, but the sheltered workshops have closed in recent decades. The phase of industrial

⁸⁵ SOU 1964:51, *Samordnad rehabilitering. Del II: Allmänna principer och vissa organisationsförslag*. Betänkande av Centrala Rehabiliteringsberedningen (Stockholm: SOU, 1964); SOU 1965:9, *Arbetsmarknadspolitik*: Betänkande avgivet av 1960 års Arbetsmarknadsutredning (Stockholm: SOU, 1965); SOU 1972:54, *Skyddat arbete: Betänkande avgivet av Utredningen rörande den skyddade sysselsättningen* (Stockholm: SOU, 1972).

⁸⁶ Rikard Palmer, “Arbetsprövning av utvecklingshämmade,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 73, no. 2 (1971), 35.

⁸⁷ Examples of such research are Anders Ch. Gogstad, “Personaluppsättning och personalsamverkan på skyddad verkstad,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 70, no. 4 (1968); Rikard Palmer, “Skyddade verkstäder för psykiskt utvecklingshämmade,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning. Supplementum 2* (1968); Palmer (1974).

⁸⁸ Wessman (1964), 9.

⁸⁹ This can be exemplified by referring to Nils Häkansson, “Referat II Från Ronneby-symposiet om skyddade verkstäder okt. 1968,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 1 (1969); Horst Norrlund, “Arbete åt utvecklingsstörda,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 3 (1969); Lars Weckroth, “Referat III Från Ronneby-symposiet om skyddade verkstäder okt. 1968,” *Psykisk utvecklingshämning* 71, no. 1 (1969).

⁹⁰ Gogstad (1968), 39.

⁹¹ Weckroth (1969), 32.

⁹² Jan Hjärpe, *Normaliseringens kvalitet: förutsättningar och utnyttjandegrad inom tre livsområden för utvecklingsstörda: boende, fritid och daglig verksamhet* (Uppsala: Projekt Mental retardation, Ulleråkers sjukhus, 1984).

⁹³ Socialstyrelsen, *Från dagcenter till arbete: psykiskt utvecklingsstördas möjligheter till arbete och sysselsättning* (Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen, 1984), 13.

work for people with ID within this specific organisational form was very short-lived, yet alternatives were not sufficiently developed. The general labour market was not adequately prepared for a group of individuals unable to meet societal norms. It appears that little has changed to this day.

Discussion

The historical development of employment opportunities for people with ID followed, until the shift between the 1950s and the early 1960s, a guarding and patronising tradition, as previous research has highlighted for the interwar, war and post-war periods.⁹⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, a solid commitment to social reforms became visible, including employment and work for people with ID. The principal innovation of this period was the establishment of sheltered workshops, which – consistent with international research⁹⁵ – reveals clear parallels, particularly with developments in Anglophone countries. The industrialisation of the open labour market was reflected in these new institutions, although this phase ultimately proved relatively short-lived. In line with previous Scandinavian research,⁹⁶ the significance of normalisation concepts cannot be underestimated. Finally, the 1980s were characterised by some disenchantment, as awareness grew that the pursued integration into the open labour market had not yet been fulfilled. These problems exist even today.⁹⁷

This research highlights the significance of work based on policy papers, professional publications, and the FUB advocacy group. Therefore, some limitations concerning the scope of this study are inevitable. For future research, an in-depth analysis of curriculum reforms and archival research, such as regional studies based on materials from FUB, could contribute to expanding the historical perspective on work for a vulnerable group. However, based on the results of this study and on theoretical approaches, some tendencies are emerging.

Continuity and change in the purpose of education

As outlined above, Biesta distinguishes between three education functions, or domains: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification.⁹⁸ It is striking that qualification was scarcely a topic in the professional debate. Although work integration has been a critical issue, contemporary professionals have neglected to discuss aspects of knowledge, skills and understanding related to education for pupils with ID. Notwithstanding several curricular reforms, these questions have never been at the centre of the debate. This phenomenon highlights the low value placed on qualifications in special schools. It appears that traditional aspects of care have been more highly valued than qualification.

In contrast, the socialisation of pupils was a significant issue. During the entire period from 1945 to 1989, there was an ambition to support the transition to work life, albeit with a shifting focus. The social control and usefulness of people categorised as

⁹⁴ For example, Areschoug (2000); Barow (2009); Barow (2011); Broberg and Tydén (2005); Engwall (2000).

⁹⁵ See Conrad (2020); Kilgannon (2023).

⁹⁶ Tøssebro et al. (2012).

⁹⁷ Arvidsson (2016); Taubner and Luthra (2024).

⁹⁸ Biesta (2009); Biesta (2020).

“feeble-minded” was the focus from the 1940s to the 1960s. However, the desirable adaptation of the individual to societal norms can be traced back to the 1970s. Only slowly did a critical perspective emerge, questioning this compensatory perspective and focusing on the relationship between the individual and the social environment.

The gradual pushback of the socialisation domain paved the way for a more substantial impact from subjectification. Although the education of “happy people”⁹⁹ was an objective at the beginning of the period, aspects of personal development, satisfaction and well-being emerged and were enhanced from the 1970s onwards. However, the domain of subjectification did not exist in a pure form. It was often combined with socialisation, underlying existing educational ambivalences.

Employability and social usefulness through an ableism lens

The objective of social integration through work was widely accepted throughout the researched period. This view has been firmly rooted in Swedish society since the emergence of poor relief in the mid-nineteenth century, as highlighted by previous research on work and disability.¹⁰⁰ This study reveals the remarkable resilience of this attitude. Becoming economically advantageous played a crucial role in the education and care system. At the same time, securing and maintaining a job was a sign of adulthood. The ideology that everyone must be useful in society appears to be remarkably robust, lasting for many decades and continuing to this day. From an ableism perspective, this is highly problematic because societal norms can lead to the exclusion of people who cannot or do not want to fulfil these expectations.¹⁰¹

However, there have been changes over time. For the first few decades of the researched period, until the early 1960s, paternalism was characterised by the denial of self-determination and disciplinary measures.¹⁰² The objective of adapting to the norms of society was outspoken, even into the 1970s, and sometimes combined to reduce social relief costs and to “eliminate”¹⁰³ or to “compensate for their mental handicap.”¹⁰⁴ During that time, more subtle forms of ableism occurred, attributed to people with ID having positive qualities such as “friendliness, carefulness, loyalty and willingness to work.”¹⁰⁵ There are qualitative differences between these forms of ableism; however, even benevolent ableism is problematic because it neglects individual personality and hinders personal development. This article therefore underscores the long road left to travel towards genuine social inclusion; one that is not solely based on equal performance but on the universal equal rights of all individuals.

Transformation and stability of Swedish society

The structural changes in the Swedish economy – from an agrarian to an industrial, and then a service-based society – found their counterpart in the employment oppor-

⁹⁹ Jungner (1948), 86.

¹⁰⁰ Förhammar (1991); Bengtsson (2023).

¹⁰¹ Goodley (2014); Stafford (2020).

¹⁰² Engwall (2000); Grunewald (2008).

¹⁰³ SOU 1969:35, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Nordfors and Nordfors (1978), 197.

¹⁰⁵ Nordfors and Nordfors (1978), 197.

tunities for people with ID. The idea of working in the agricultural sector disappeared with progressive industrialisation. The societal response of the 1960s was the emergence of sheltered workshops. The FUB’s early observation that the increase in working opportunities in public services did not result in more jobs for people with ID is highly relevant even today.¹⁰⁶ An adjustment relying solely on labour market mechanisms appears unfeasible. Instead, targeted interventions are required, for example, within the framework of supported employment. In this context, considering national, regional and local labour markets seems crucial for creating jobs.

Several follow-up studies from the researched period and studies conducted today reveal a robust gender gap in work opportunities.¹⁰⁷ With a background in special schools for pupils with ID, research indicates that young men have better chances than young women of entering the labour market. This aspect merits deeper consideration for the future planning of education and employment opportunities for a marginalised group of young people.

To conclude, the development of working opportunities for people with ID between 1945 and 1989 exemplifies the transformation of the Swedish welfare state. Even though society has undergone considerable changes, pursuing social usefulness is a constant goal. People with ID have always been – and are still today – at risk of exclusion from the general labour market. Comprehensive education and social welfare system reforms must be pursued over the long term to ensure equal participation for all, regardless of the individual’s economically measurable work capacity.

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¹⁰⁶ Riksförbundet FUB (1978); for today’s situation see Arvidsson (2016) and Taubner and Luthra (2024).

¹⁰⁷ Jungner (1952); Ribbing (1963); Wessman (1965); Arvidsson (2016).

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