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Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

The relationship between disability, gender and education in the Norwegian context

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Short paper from Norway to the UNESCO's Monitoring Report for 2003 focusing on Gender

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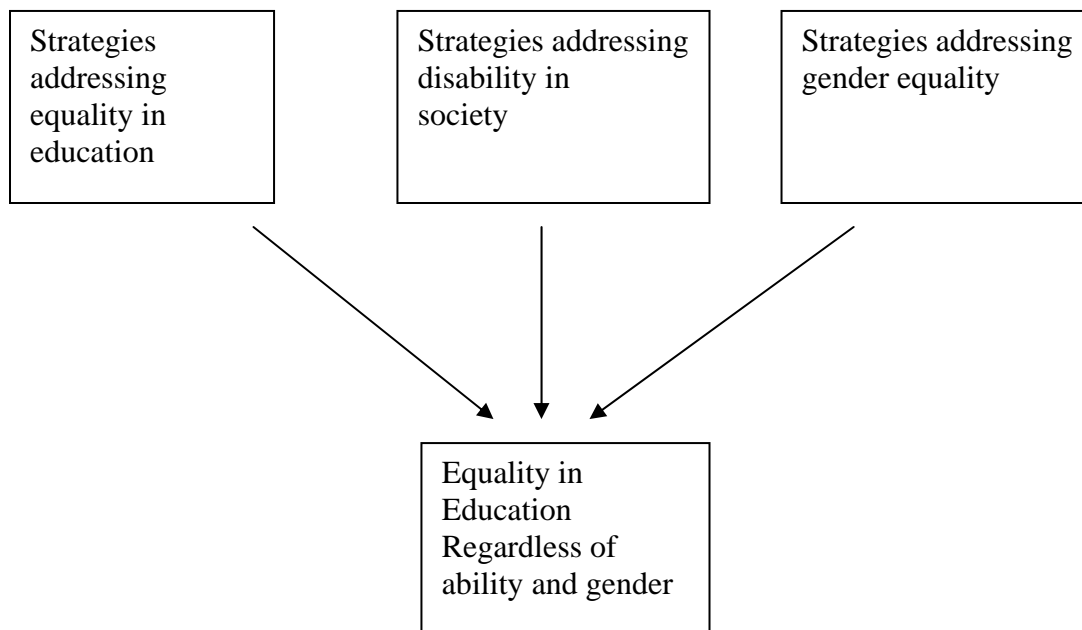
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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISABILITY, GENDER AND EDUCATION IN THE NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

Introduction

Disability is an important dimension along which discrimination occurs, and this may be particularly marked in the case of the education of girls having some form of disability. Norway has used strategies along three separate dimensions (education, disability and gender) in its work towards the goal of education for all (EFA), regardless of ability and gender. Strategies targeting specifically girls with disabilities in education have hardly occurred. The strategies can be illustrated in the following way:



Norway has come a long way towards gender equality in education and has to a great extent combated discrimination of girls with disabilities. However, new and unexpected challenges in education related to the gender issue and special needs have emerged recently.

1. Strategies addressing equal rights to education

Persons with disabilities were not included when the legal rights of all children to basic education were first established in 1920. The ordinary school system disclaimed its responsibility for children with disabilities until the late 1940s.

At the end of the 1940s a total reform and expansion of the national education system was planned. The right to education for children with disabilities became reality through the Special School Act of 1951. Special schools were established all over the country. Throughout the fifties and sixties the quality of special education gradually improved. Special teachers were trained, the standards of the provisions were generally good and they reached out to most of the children in both urban and rural communities.

From the 1970s the principle of integration and inclusion gained ground. The new legislation on education of 1975 established that as a general rule, all children should be educated in their own local school. The responsibility to provide special education provisions for all children was given to the municipalities. All children had to be registered at the local school in their home district. Authority was transferred from the state to county and municipality level. A school psychology service was established and the special schools had to redefine their roles and become a support and resource for the regular schools.

The overall strategies to address equality for persons with disabilities in education have been to secure the legal rights to education for all, first through special laws and a segregated system of special schools and classes, and finally within the ordinary school system, followed up by strategies to make the educational system in general more inclusive.

2. Strategies addressing equal rights to participate in society

Norwegian history has many examples and descriptions about how society has discriminated and violated persons with disabilities

The right for all people to be included as equal citizens was increasingly recognized after the Second World War (1940-45) and a special focus was placed on the situation for persons with disabilities after the UN's International Year for Disabled in 1981. A main strategy has been to secure the legal rights to "full participation and equality", not by passing separate laws for persons with disabilities, but by including rights and obligations for persons with disabilities in the laws that apply to all citizens. This includes the democratic right to be represented when decisions are made in matters that have a consequence for persons with disabilities. To secure that the legal rights are being implemented, persons with disabilities have some special rights that are mentioned in the laws. Children with disabilities are for

example given priority in enrolment to kindergarten. It has become clear that the human rights of all citizens must be closely monitored. The national and international disability movements have played an important role in putting issues on the agenda, in initiating public debate and in monitoring the processes and outcomes of the actions taken.

Councils for disabled persons have been established on local levels with the mandate to promote participation and equality and they represent an important link between the authorities and the organizations.

In the 1990s a new strategy in the politics for persons with disabilities was launched, namely to work out national plans of action that obliged all relevant ministries to carry out clearly specified actions. Earmarked grants, stimulation grants, information, projects and user participation followed. Also on the municipal and county levels, plans of actions were worked out and they have on the whole contributed to more integrated and long-term solutions.

The overall strategies to overcome discrimination have been to secure the right to full participation and equality of all citizens in an inclusive society, and to specify how these rights in some cases require special measures to become a reality for persons with disabilities.

3. Addressing gender equality

Although women have had equal access to education in Norway for many years, history shows that females have had to fight for their rights to education. It was as late as in 1874 that the first woman graduated from lower secondary education. During the next ten years women were given the right to attend higher education and to study at the University.

The first integrated school for girls and boys was established in the late 1880s, but it took 60 more years until girls and boys were to receive the same teaching and curriculum. From 1971 the national curriculum for schools was required to make active efforts to promote general gender equality in society.

Since then, gender equality in education has been addressed as a general gender issue without particular strategies targeting education. Examples of actions taken were the establishing of a Gender Equality Act, a Gender Equality Ombudsman and an Appeals' Board. Since the 1990s all public committees and boards were required to have at least 40 per cent representation of each gender. Furthermore, in 1997 a National Centre for Gender Equality was established. From 2002 onwards, The Gender Equality Act has included protection against sexual harassment. The gender equality dimension is supposed to be mainstreamed into the work of all ministries.

The necessity of having mechanisms that follow up on developments in society and identify and reveal those conditions that work against achieving gender equality have also

become recognised. The established mechanisms are at state as well as local levels. Gender related issues often feature in the public debate.

4. Unexpected challenges

Recent studies of the situation in Norwegian school today, have revealed some trends that were unexpected in view of the intentions of the gender equality endeavours in society.

Of those who receive some kind of special needs education based on individual assessments approximately two thirds have been boys all through the 1990s and up until today. These differences in services between boys and girls are less significant when it comes to pupils with hearing impairment and communication problems (Moen & Øie 1994) and more significant when it comes to pupils with motor problems, attention deficit problems, and especially behavioural problems where 91 percent are boys. Boys more often than girls tend to be defined as deviant in school while girls are seen as more competent than boys, both theoretically and socially. On the other hand boys' self evaluation and self-confidence are far more positive than girls (Grue 1998, Sørliie & Nordahl 1998). There is an indication that stronger needs are required for girls in order to elicit special needs education.

Most of the research on special needs education and gender has focused on behavioural problems. The explanations to the gender difference in this area have been sought in social mechanisms. It has been suggested that boys demand more attention than girls and that they, to a stronger degree, make their needs visible. It has also been suggested that education may not be as well adapted to boys as to girls. The strong overrepresentation of female teachers has also been suggested as a possible explanation.

Another unexpected gender difference relates to the persistence of a traditional choice of subjects in upper secondary school among students with special needs. Boys with special needs have a tendency to choose mechanical subjects, while girls with special needs choose health and social subjects and arts.

Concluding remarks

Education for girls with disabilities and special needs in Norway is grounded on an ideology of equality for all. In practical politics this means promoting equity between rural and urban areas, between different social classes and between men and women. This ideology has been put into practice through legislation related to the rights to education for all, inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and gender equity. The fundamental principle is that all persons should contribute according to their abilities and receive services from society

according to their needs. However, it has been necessary to establish mechanisms that follow up on developments in society and identify and reveal those conditions that work against inclusion, quality education for all and gender equality. It is yet to be seen how the unexpected gender differences that have been revealed through recent research can be explained in the light of previous developments and how they can be met.

When looking at the development of different strategies, it is necessary to keep in mind that the concept of disability is being understood and interpreted quite differently today than when the first educational provisions for persons with disabilities were established. There has also been a marked change in the understanding of children's psycho-social development and conditions for learning during the last 50 years. In addition, the economic situation of the country and the typical views on the role of society and family have undergone changes. Such contextual conditions have influenced choice as well as effects of chosen strategies.