Undesirable citizens: Education, care and control of the “Feeble-minded” in the Swedish Province of Malmöhus, 1900–1950

Citoyens indésirables : éducation, soins et contrôle des personnes « faibles d’esprit » dans la province suédoise de Malmöhus, 1900–1950

Thomas Barow

University of Borås, The School of Education and Behavioural Sciences, Allégatan 1, 501 90 Borås, Sweden

This paper contains the main results of a recently completed historical research project about the situation of persons categorized as “feeble-minded” in Sweden. In this study, the case of Malmöhus province constitutes the microhistorical core. Here, educational and care institutions such as schools, asylums and working homes were particularly established in the first half of the 20th century. The motives behind these foundations will be discussed and the working routines in those institutions will be analysed in terms of teaching and after-care of the inmates and their exclusion justified by social constructs such as “uneducable” or “moral imbecile”. This paper aims at demonstrating how feeble-mindedness was perceived as a social problem, and how close the efforts of education and care were connected to eugenic ideology and control. Thereby, the history of the feeble-minded will be interpreted as a striking example of the contradictions of modernity. The coincidence of social inclusion and exclusion was a characteristic of the situation of an undesirable group of citizens in the Swedish society.
under the era of modernization. This outcome is of high relevance for understanding the early historical development of the Nordic welfare state.

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Introduction

In the era of modernization, school was often described as an instrument of social integration, and thereby education could contribute to societal cohesion. Over the last 250 years, an increasing number of people were integrated in the education system – which laid the foundations for active citizenship. However, in regard to persons with disabilities, some contradictory phenomena can be observed. Several authors refer to developments such as “integration is followed by tendencies of segregation” (Sejersted, 2005: 511). All attempts to put through a school for all children were accompanied by voices and measures to separate some pupils. This phenomenon was analysed as a “big paradox” in school history (Börjesson & Palmblad, 2003: 9). Especially the situation of persons labelled as feebleminded – a translation of the Swedish term “sinnesslö”1 which was officially in use until 1954 – was often extremely difficult.

In the historiography of special education, however, the dialectic process of liberation and control has been in focus for a long time. Once again, and with respect to the history of education, the ambivalent character of pedagogy was emphasized recently by Elger-Rüttgardt (2010). The janus-faced particular nature of education becomes clear when attempts of human cultivation and development on one side, disciplinary power and control on the other side are considered. At the

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1 All translations are done by the author. The contemporary terminology is kept up to underline the historical character of social constructs like “feeble-mindedness”. The author thanks Dr. Johnson Jament, Richard Baldwin and Isabell Schulz for checking the language.
same time, research on the situation of disabled people may generate some “new theoretical perspectives on mechanisms for marginalisation, social exclusion but also inclusion” as Simonsen (2005: 151) stressed.

Until now, and referring to relevant Swedish publications (Nordström, 1968; Söder, 1978; Areschoug, 2000), very little historical research has been carried out on the regional level of Malmöhus province. One popular-scientific book was published on the boarding school Möllevångshem in Lund (Jacobson, 1978). Thus, the author’s own research (Barow, 2009) may contribute to fill a gap in the history of special education and social care in Sweden. In this paper, the main results of the microhistorical core of the study are presented in English for the first time. This may help to make the findings of the study accessible.

The prime aim of the current research is to show how the phenomenon of “feeble-mindedness” in the era of Sweden’s rapid modernization was perceived as a social problem, to describe and to analyse the pedagogical, medical and social ways of acting that the problem evoked. In particular, it will be discussed how close the efforts of education and care were connected to eugenic ideology and social control.

History can be understood as the attempt to establish a relation to the past, not the reconstruction of the foretime as such. The scientist is faced the challenge to interpret historical sources. In recent publications on social and educational history, a combination of a hermeneutic and analytic approach is described as an opportunity to understand both historical processes and structures and individual action and subjective motives (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2010). Therefore contemporary literature and records of different institutions like boarding schools, school administration and social authorities were used in this research. To focus on the first half of the 20th century can be justified by the enormous social and societal development Sweden was passing through.

Specialist terms are often difficult to translate, especially if their connotations change with time. The contemporary expression “care of the feeble-minded”, which is a translation from the Swedish term “sinnesslövård”, includes all pedagogical, social, and medical measures taken on behalf of a heterogeneous group whose very composition is itself a subject of research. In this connection, the phrase “feeble-mindedness” should not – despite a partial correspondence – be equated to the more modern term “intellectual disability”. However, the care of the feeble-minded can be seen as a precursor of special education for people with mental disabilities.

The regional and local level social policy and planning

As late as 1954, the Swedish law on teaching and care of mentally retarded came into force. Ten years earlier, in 1944/45 a first law on education and care of the educable feeble-minded was introduced. However, for almost the entire first half of 20th century there existed no legal basis in Sweden, neither for teaching nor for care of persons who were considered as feeble-minded. In this regard, depending on local circumstances, institutions like boarding schools or asylums were founded and run by private persons, philanthropic societies, towns or provinces.

In the Southern Swedish province of Malmöhus, with a population of about half a million people in the 1920s, a first boarding school for idiots was established as early as 1878. The so-called Möllevångshem, placed on the outskirts of Lund, was the first school of its type in Sweden founded by a province. The home increased in the course of time and working home units came up. With some 150 inmates in the 1940s, the Möllevångshem was the biggest institution for educable feeble-minded in Southern Sweden. At the beginning of the 20th century, this was the only boarding school of relevance in the province of Malmöhus. Only in the city of Malmö a private one-room school existed, founded in the 1880s and closed in 1915.

At the turn of the 20th century, and disregarding the previously existing Möllevångshem, no systematic public planning of education and care for the feeble-minded can be observed in the province of Malmöhus. In 1908, the county council estimated the number of places needed for the feeble-minded would be 230 (Jacobson, 1978: 46), but no concrete measures were taken. Social innovations in this field were still based on philanthropic persuasion; the state contributed some minor subsidies. This structure was characteristic for the early Swedish welfare state. On the initiative of Ebba Ramsay, one of the key persons in Swedish care history, an asylum for uneducable idiots was
founded in Helsingborg already in 1902. This home was subsequently expanded and it accommodated about 200 people in the 1930s.

A more systematic care planning on the province level cannot be observed earlier than in the 1920s. In 1918, the new Swedish law on poor relief came into force. Among other things, the municipalities became obliged to run their own poorhouses. At that time, the situation in such institutions was oppressing. Doctor Georg Hallbäck, committed in poor relief, gave a vivid description of the inmates, the “the dregs of society”, as he called them. “Jumbled together [...] were elderly and children, those who are physically chronically ill, mentally ill and feeble-minded, women, [those who are, T.B.] fitting for working homes and others” (Hallbäck, 1925: 93).

In most cases “special care” would be needed, Hallbäck concluded. Thus a stronger influence of the state was demanded in a resolution passed in 1924 in the town of Eslöv where some 400 welfare officers and politicians discussed the future structure of care. According to the resolution, the provinces should take the responsibility for caring for the educable feeble-minded. In contrast, the care of the “uneducable” and other “unmanageable” feeble-minded should be organized and carried out by the state.

To underline these demands, a regional social committee was established in 1927 and identified an enormous lack of places for the feeble-minded in the homes. One of the committee members, Professor Einar Sjövall, claimed a stronger engagement from the state to build up new homes for those people (Barow, 2009: 290). The required centralization of responsibility coincided with demands to develop a psychiatric dominated “rational care”, as it was more vigorously advocated by Alfred Petréen, an influential medical inspector and a social democratic member of the Swedish Parliament. With regard to age, sex, intelligence, degree of disability, and working capacity, the feeble-minded should receive differentiated care – a social policy which reached its peak in the 1940s.

In the interwar period, however, the opportunities to go ahead with these ambitious plans were limited. With financial aid from the state, some extensions of existing institutions were realized, and few private homes were opened, but were far from satisfying the need of places. Only in the mid 1930s, as a result of opening the state hospital Vipeholm, a modest improvement of the province and private homes can be observed. In 1939, a new planning commission was convened. In this context Professor Sture Siwe, doctor and member of the board at Möllevångshem, demanded the further expansion of the care system. In a memorandum in 1940, he argued in a utilitarian manner for the “society’s interest”: The “increasing rate of work” would result in a number of people who became a “hindrance” (Malmöhus läns landstings protokoll år 1940: 7). He saw the feeble-minded children in the families as “a constant source of vexation and neglect of the others” (ibid.). Moreover, these children would tie up a full adult labourer. Even though Siwe’s arguments might express the contemporary opinions of doctors, he was only partly successful. A decision to run a new private working home in Malmöhus was made in 1943, but it could not be opened before the end of World War II.

On the other hand, on a provincial level the emphasis was obviously in the realm of care, the focus on the local level considered to a much greater extent educational questions. In the city of Malmö, it is noticeable that the public school administration was involved in planning and organizing education for feeble-minded children. Two discussions can be distinguished; (a) starting a boarding school (1906–1915), (b) further planning due to lack of school places (1929/30). Both debates reflect the persuasion that education and care of feeble-minded children was first of all a pedagogical assignment, but it was doubted if this could be the responsibility of the primary school administration.

At the beginning of 20th century, feeble-minded pupils from Malmö were usually referred to other institutions, e.g. to Möllevångshem in Lund or to a similar school in Stockholm. In 1906, the initial efforts were undertaken to found a boarding school in Malmö. In the preparatory work, led by local school inspector A. O. Stenkula, a range of arguments about children’s opportunities to develop knowledge and skills came up. Nevertheless, the committee members’ suspected moral degeneracy if the feeble-minded have to stand on their own feet. In the first half of the 20th century, this was a standard argument to motivate aftercare (Barow, 2009: 177). Finally, the quiet suburb Håkanstorp was seen appropriate for a new boarding school which was opened in 1915 and named after the same place.

Only some years after it became obvious that Håkanstorp’s about 30 places were not at all sufficient, a waiting list existed. At the end of the 1920s, new efforts were made to extend the system of education and care for the feeble-minded children in Malmö. A New Committee, consisting of
representatives of Håkanstorp and the local school administration, focused upon providing education and aftercare for “educable feeble-minded” persons. The situation of the uneducable was described as being problematic, but no concrete action was taken to improve their position. A decision was made to institutionalise the existing special classes as external day schools, a development which will be discussed in detail in the next section. The committee suspected that the adult feeble-minded “could easily become threats to society due to their susceptibility to influence, their uncontrolled sexuality, and their scant moral resistance” (Malmö stads uppostringshem Håkanstorp, Korrespontens 1913–1947, E1:1). To avoid a situation like this, appropriate occupation in working homes or – only for male persons – in controlled family care was considered as a solution. A working home for 30 men on the outskirts of Malmö was opened in 1930. The committee recommended “with regard to risky sexual relations” (ibid.) to intern feeble-minded women. Some of them stayed in the working home unit within Håkanstorp, others should be occupied in their families after release from school.

The committee’s remarks on aftercare clearly reflect the eugenic discourse of the interwar period, as it was reported by Broberg and Tydén (2005). On the basis of a utilitarian ideology, the inmate’s capability to work became the central motive for education and care, and thus for the local planning process. It is, however, remarkable that sterilization as a way to solve the “risk” of pregnancy was not yet outspoken by the committee. Instead, keeping control through internment was preferred. These considerations on the local level formed a clear contrast to the political and the professional discussion in Sweden around 1930.

Education between normalization and separation

In the realm of school and education, some ambivalent tendencies of inclusion and exclusion can be observed. These trends were embedded in a process of societal differentiation and thus homogenisation of educational groups. In Malmö an increasing number of special classes emerged. It was intended to increase the effects of teaching by reducing heterogeneity in the classroom, and at the same time to help the individual. These efforts led to a chain of institutions within the primary school settings, starting with so-called a-classes and b-classes, continuing with “help classes” and other special classes (e.g. for word-blind children and stammerers). At the bottom of the hierarchy, there were external classes for feeble-minded children. On the provincial level, in connection with the expected compulsory school law for feeble-minded, another external class for feeble-minded was opened in Helsingborg in 1943.

Beyond the responsibility of local school authorities, there existed the two above-named boarding schools of Håkanstorp (Malmö) and Möllevångshem (Lund), superintended by the National Board of Medicine (Medicinalstyrelsen). This institution controlled the homes for the uneducable feeble-minded as well as the state-run schools for moral imbeciles in central Sweden which also enrolled pupils from Malmöhus province.

The different administrative responsibilities – local school administration for the external classes, and National Board of Medicine for the boarding schools – reflected the discourse on normality and deviation. As long as the local authorities were taking charge, attending special classes was to some extent interpreted as deviation but was still in the zone of normality – though on its edge. When it came to institutions directly controlled by the state, the inmates were clearly seen as being anomalous. This individualistic and pathologic view on disability was reflected in medical certificates in which the child was categorized as feeble-minded.

This tension between normality and deviation can be best perceived in the context of establishing external classes for feeble-minded in Malmö. In the early 1920s, there existed only a few help classes for slow learners. From 1923 a first class for feeble-minded children came up, followed by a second in 1924. However, the local school inspector Gunnar Thunander doubted whether teaching those children “belongs to the tasks of primary school” (Malmö Stads Folksskolestyrelses Protokoll 1924, Bil. § 124a, A1AA:11). Education in a boarding school was seen as a better, but an expensive alternative. For children attending help classes, contact to “normally gifted” pupils should be of high relevance, argued Valdemar Lahne (1926) who was responsible for IQ-testing in Malmö. But, Lahne concluded, due to the low IQ of the feeble-minded and their high dependence on help it would be better for them to attend a boarding school. The ideal of homogeneity by placing children in different institutions – slow
learners in help classes and feeble-minded in boarding schools – was also described for other parts of Sweden (Nordström, 1968). It has to be interpreted in connection with establishing of a primary school for – almost – all children, by separating a few of the other who could not fulfil the societal norms and demands of the majority.

At the end of the 1920s, further efforts were undertaken in Malmö to organize a differentiated school system especially for the feeble-minded. As it was mentioned earlier in this paper, a committee was founded to study the situation of these people. As a result, some further external classes were established. The reasons for founding these classes were contradictory. On the one hand, parent’s wishes to avoid a separation from their children was outspoken, and therefore it would be easier for the feeble-minded “to get along in life if they are not separated in their childhood” (Malmö stads uppföringshem Håkanstorp, Korrespondens 1913–1947, E1:1). On the other hand, it was still doubted whether those children could receive the education they needed in external classes. According to the committee, a boarding school could often offer better education and also protection. Nonetheless, education in an external class was much cheaper compared to a boarding school, and this fact seemed to be decisive for establishing such classes in future. This discussion in Malmö underlines the strategic alliance between general and special education: relief of primary schools and their teachers, special support for the pupils concerned.

From a parent’s perspective, there was a higher acceptance for external classes than the boarding school. Additionally the attitudes of the local school administration towards the new classes became increasingly positive. Due to the lack of places at Håkanstorp, the external classes were initially regarded as a patched-up solution. Especially towards the end of the 1940s, the pedagogical advantages and the “flexibility” of those classes were pointed out. Thus transferring children from primary school or help classes to an external class was seemed to be much easier. However, a 1949 local report stated that children “not infrequently” (Malmö Folkkolestyrelse, Protokoll 1943, Bil. § 255d, A1AA:33) develop so satisfactorily in an external class and suggested a possible retransfer of them into a help class or an ordinary primary school. Based on records it has to be assumed, however, that such retransfers were an exception, at least until 1945. Moreover, social contacts between children from ordinary primary school and external classes did hardly exist.

Even though the situation of pupils in schools for the feeble-minded can be understood in terms of marginalisation, they were still included in the education system. A hierarchy had been created within the society’s misfits. Both boarding schools, Möllevangshem and Håkanstorp, declared almost every year a small number of children as being uneducable. As a result, these young people were transferred to their parent’s home or care homes. The label “uneducable” itself can be interpreted as a social construct, and the criteria for belonging to this in many respects stigmatised group were handled quite flexibly. Traditionally the missing ability to learn reading was the most important factor. But during the first half of the 20th century some distinct changes took place. The first IQ-tests were developed in France at the turn of the century. In Sweden such test batteries spread in the interwar period, in the 1940s they were quite common. First of all psychiatrists argued for treating persons with an IQ between 40 and 50 as educable, whereas teachers have drawn a line at a test value of about 50–55 (Annell, 1945: 149). This extension was accompanied by a growing awareness about the inmate’s capability to work. The persons’ social usefulness became the decisive factor for adjudicating educability in the 1930s especially, during World War II when utilitarian motives took over (Areschoug, 2000: 129).

This shift was reflected in the social practices within the boarding schools. Moreover, pupils’ maladjusted behaviour in combination with lack of places had an impact on the acceptance of educability. Children with aggressive behaviour patterns were more likely to be declared uneducable. In the two boarding schools, there is the evidence of pupils who attended school for some years, and they were certified as uneducable in order “to make room” for those children who were “more educable” (Malmö stads uppföringshem Håkanstorp, Protokoll 1916–1940, A1:1). Educability in the first half of the 20th century was thus not taken for granted. It was enfranchised or deprived in relation to the individual requirements, and the actual situation at the respective boarding school.

Another way of segregation was to be declared “moral imbecile”, a term which was introduced in the Swedish discourse by Thorborg Rappe as early as 1903. She picked this up from the US context in her study trip where she observed society’s increasing precaution against people attributes e.g.
nastiness and brutality. Rappe, strongly engaged in teacher education for idiots, connected the term to the upcoming discussion on race hygiene (Rappe, 1903: 29). The debate on moral imbecility reached its peak in Sweden in the 1920s when two state-run special institutions were founded, Sálbohed for boys and Vänersborg for girls. Both establishments were obviously eugenically motivated (Barow, 2009: 147).

Consequently from Möllevångshem and Hákanstorp, more than a dozen of boys and some girls were transferred to these state-run institutions. For these young people it was often the starting point for a long-lasting odyssey through different homes. Regarding the reasons for such transferral, some distinct gender aspects come into focus. The stereotype of “sexual instability” was determining for girls, as pointed out by Engwall (2000: 141 ff.). With respect to boys, the cliché of “male criminality” was of high relevance. For the boarding schools, these transfers meant relief as well as the discharges because of the element of non-educability. The tiered separation of inmates was essential in the system of rational care which was dominant until the 1950s.

Care between humanity and control

Like many other parts of Sweden at the turn of the 20th century, institutionalisation of care of the feeble-minded was at the very beginning in Malmöhus province. During a period of 50 years, it was first in the interwar period that a remarkable expansion took place, both in terms of working homes and care homes. This extension was based on private commitment and could be realized through modest state subventions and support from the county council. Financial problems were, however, a limiting factor for an even far more reaching expansion. Furthermore, plans to reach a higher level of state involvement in caring for all uneducable feeble-minded failed. An exception to this was Vipeholm, the state run hospital for the “unmanageable, uneducable feeble-minded” could be established in Lund in the mid 1930s. Though the institution was situated in the province of Malmöhus, its inmates were from all over Sweden.

Demands for working homes arose as early as 1885 when the first inmates finished school. This was initially postulated by the Möllevångshem. However, these initiatives as well as further plans failed due to the lack of economic resources. Instead, at the beginning of the 20th century, some male alumni were placed in the so-called controlled family care (Jacobson, 1978: 47), a model which roots are in Denmark and the German state Saxony. These young men eked out a living as farm labourers, but were still supervised by the home.

Not until the 1920s were the first working home units founded within Möllevångshem. The economic profit was expected to be quite low. Thus it was the declared motive that work could have an educating effect. In subsequent years, some other homes were established, partly in connection to existing boarding schools, partly as self-containing private institutions. Finally, nine working homes existed in Malmöhus province in 1945, facilitating occupation for about 280 people. Whereas the controlled family care at no time reached nameable quantities, only some 30 young men could be employed. Just a very few former inmates managed to live fully independently. The social progress of this extension can be seen in its disentanglement from poor relief.

On the other hand, this development consisted notable elements of control. The traditional protection of the feeble-minded was completed by protection against the persons concerned. Hence, a gender aspect became obvious. Due to classical social roles, but first of all with background in the ongoing eugenic discourse, young men were offered occupation outside the home, e.g. in self-containing working homes in rural areas or in controlled family care. While at the same time, young women stayed in boarding schools and were occupied with household chores, e.g. kitchen work and laundry. This gender-specific pattern founded its expression already in the planning processes for new working homes.

The placement of uneducable feeble-minded in asylums was earlier interpreted as a “passive objective” (Söder, 1978: 136). Indeed, the care was more aimed at basic needs like health, food and hygiene. With respect to the historical context this can, nonetheless, be understood as a social achievement. At Nyhem, for example, the asylum for idiots in Helsingborg, about two thirds of the first 40 inmates, hosted between 1902 and 1907, died within five years after their enrolment due to tuberculoses and other diseases (Barow, 2009: 332). In particular, during both world wars the situation in some homes
was difficult. Due to those conditions, the death rate increased notably, in Nyhem (1914/15) and in Vipeholm (1941–1943), a phenomenon which was discussed by contemporaries (Alström, 1943; Ahnsjö, 1943) and historians (Engwall, 2005; Bommenel, 2006: 370 f.). Also in other homes the war times resulted in reductions e.g. of food and fuel, but apart from some loss of weight the consequences were far from that serious. Over the whole period of research, the health conditions in the homes became much better as a result of medical and hygienic improvements.

Furthermore, with respect to the inner development of institutions the assumption of a passive period can be questioned, at least on the basis of the situation in Malmöhus province. The home of Nyhem was taken over by the county council in 1920, thus a “humanitarian and medical question” could be lead to a “rational solution”, as it was pointed out by the institution’s doctor Carl Holmdahl (1927: 217). At that time, 72 of the 98 grown-up inmates were occupied with different kinds of household and garden work; weaving, knitting etc. Moreover, the utilitarian objective became more evident in terms of some 30 educable feeble-minded women who were placed in the working home unit of Nyhem.

In state run hospital Vipeholm, the patients were in a rationalistic manner divided into seven groups based on their degree of disability. Although some of the inmates were obliged to work. Parallel to the spreading of occupational therapy in Sweden in the 1940s, such treatment also appeared in Vipeholm. Under the wartime conditions, even here the making of consumable items was explicit required. Such endeavours underline the objective target of making the inmates socially useful.

Registration and sterilization

The eugenic movement and the sterilization of feeble-minded persons in Sweden and the neighbouring countries were extensively delineated by historians (e.g. Tydén, 2002; Broberg & Tydén, 2005). Recently, relevance of the sterilization policy for the early development of the Scandinavian welfare states was discussed. Bo Stråth (2005: 48) pointed out: “The idea was to get rid of unborn people who potentially were a burden to the new welfare society as it was designed in the 1930s, and unfit or unwilling to partake in that project”. However, the case of the Malmöhus province can help to develop a deeper understanding of how social policy affected the local level and vice versa: how the micro and meso level, the developments in a single institution and in a town, impinged the macro level of society. In this section, these incidents and mechanisms will be explained by a card-index for feeble-minded in Malmö and by the sterilization of inmates from special schools.

The idea to register disabled persons existed in many countries already in the late 19th century. The original aim was to ascertain planning data for education and social care. But from the 1910s the connection to the eugenic discourse became more and more obvious. In Denmark already in 1915, the census of imbecile was certified being of “race hygienic value” (Hansen, 1915: 82). In Saxony a “file of the inferior” was established in the mid 1920s, 10 years after about 140,000 persons were registered. The 1930s debate in Sweden was highly influenced by the already existing Danish card-index and its 10,000 registered feeble-minded, as it was documented e.g. in the green paper SOU 1936:46 on sterilization.

In the first years after introducing the Swedish sterilization law 1934/35, the number of operations was not particularly high. In Malmö Ruben Holmström, assistant medical director at the new psychiatric hospital Malmö Östra, gave therefore an impulse for founding an own card-index in town. In cooperation with Åke Bylander, chef of the local child welfare office and some other doctors, the “central register for the feeble-minded” was established at Malmö Östra in 1938. Right from the beginning, the purpose was to facilitate “a rational and effective enforcement of the sterilization law” (Malmö stads barnavårdsnämnd, Protokoll A med bilagor 1938, bil. § 49b, A1AA:31), as it was emphasized in a memorandum. Employees from all types of public and social authorities including schools should announce persons who were “apparently mentally abnormal” (ibid.). A widespread article (Sjöhagen, 1940; reprinted in at least three other journals) named “feeble-minded and comparable” persons as target groups – hereby e.g. help class children, mentally ill, and criminals were included. The structure and content of the registration form resembled to a high extent the documents which were used for applying sterilization. Holmström’s aim was to integrate these people in “useful societal work”, eliminate the “risk” of pregnancy and to reduce social costs (Holmström, 1947: 18). Eventually, by applying
medical and social technologies, a modern and better society could be created – a vision shared with many doctors at that time (Qvarsell, 1985: 172).

Some institutions, like the boarding school in Häkanstorp and a home for the mentally ill, cooperated on a voluntary basis, and handed over sensitive data about the inmates, their diagnosis, medical status and social background to the hospital's register. Others, like deaconesses, priests and some doctors, refused their assistance, as it was reprehensively and dissatisfied concluded in a report (Holmström, 1947). Records from a teachers meeting in 1942 documented a controversy between the local school inspector Thunander and the external counsellor Gideon Nordal. The latter was apprehensive of both adolescent's stigmatisation and destroying trust into teachers (Malmö Folkskolestyrelse, Protokoll mellan folkskoleinspektören och lärarkåren, hjälpklasslärare m. fl. 1921–1949, A2D:1). However, after some years characterized of a “lack of interest” (Holmström, 1947: 18), information on all help class pupils were reported regularly. At the end of the 1940s, some 2000 persons were registered, most of them came from the lower class residential areas.

The initiative to run a card-index in Malmö became a model for the registration task of the National Board of Medicine (Brundin, 1940). This can be interpreted as a bottom-up process. In addition, the constitutive green paper SOU 1943:29 on compulsory schooling recommended the introduction of a card-index. However, such population policy measures could not have been legalized on national level, even though they were advocated vigorously by doctors in health administration (Johannisson, 1991). This exemplifies how power and control within the developing welfare state reached its limit.

Just as was the number of sterilizations in Malmö not higher than the average in Sweden (Bukowska Jacobsson, 2000), the extensive registration work had at the end only minor effects. Nevertheless, the emergence of the central register for the feeble-minded gave an insight view into contemporary social institutions and their leading employees' attitudes towards persons which were regarded as being deviant.

Earlier Swedish studies pointed out the existence of freedom for local protagonists applying the sterilization law (Areschoug, 2000: 247; Tydén, 2002: 427). Between introducing legal regulations in 1934/35 and reforming the law on sterilization 1941, only a small number of persons were operated in Malmöhus province. The professionals concurred, however, by any means to avoid pregnancies of the inmates and the supervised discharged persons. The motives can be seen in diffuse race hygienic ideology in connection with the belief that the persons concerned would be unfit to bring up children. At Möllevångshem, the head tried to influence parents to agree on an operation. But these attempts were quite seldom successful. On the contrary, quite a number of parents decided to take home their children to avoid this oppression.

At the beginning of 1940s, parallel to the reform of the sterilization law, the climate became harsher. The state’s interest to increase the number of operations was apparently noticed in Möllevångshem and Häkanstorp. It is due to the lack of places these institutions were endeavoured to sterilize school leavers and inmates of working homes. The growing demand for labour, especially in agriculture, gave young men the opportunity to come out and be “useful members of the society” – one of the main objectives of care in many decades.

In the perspective of the institutions, the greatest hinder was the legal consent of parents. This was needed to sterilize the inmates. Already in the 1930s, there have been single cases to withdraw parental responsibility, and thereby get a carte blanche. The far more rigid practice in the beginning of the 1940s resulted in conflicts between Möllevångshem and the parents. In 1942, more pupils than usual were released, in an inspection report 1942 Anna-Lisa Annell stated: “The new sterilization law caused major problems for the institution's administrators. In several cases when the idea of sterilization for a given inmate was raised, family members flouted the administrators' wishes and took the child back home” (Möllevångshemmet, Protokoll 1942–1943, A1:2). At the state level, the solution for this problem was seen as introducing compulsory education for the feeble-minded. Several documents, e.g. the green paper SOU 1943:29, indicate a connection between the laws on sterilization and obligatory schooling for this stigmatised group of people (Simonsen, 1999: 142; Barow, 2009: 162 ff.).

The years between 1942 and 1948 can be seen as the peak of sterilization practice in the homes of feeble-minded in Malmöhus province. The main target group were such young people who could work and possibly be released in the future. Of the inmates of Möllevångshem more young men (30) than women (25) were operated on in those years. These numbers conflict to some extent with the fact
that at large far more women were affected. The discrepancy can be explained by the condition that more boys than girls were placed in Möllevångshem and there was the tendency to transfer young men in controlled family care. With regard to young women, these numbers square to a high extent with the early study of Grunewald (1962). In Håkanstorp, a far smaller institution, the number was much lower. According to Grunewald between 1937 and 1956 nine young women left the home, six of them were sterilized. A small number of young men were also affected, as well as some other pupils from the external classes in Malmö.

The operations were carried out in an area of tension: pressure and persuasion can be observed in Möllevångshem and Håkanstorp. Some cases of resistance indicate that no direct force was used. Cases of denied release due to refusing an operation can be interpreted as de facto constraint. Remarkably, and in accordance with Tydén (2002), all documented cases of resistance included young men. This may mean that male reluctance was more distinct and at the same time it might have been accepted in a larger extent.

Conclusions

In the first half of the 20th century, tendencies of modernization within the Swedish society led to increasing public planning of school, health and welfare systems. In the realm of education and care of persons labelled as feeble-minded, these processes constituted to an appreciable extent not until the interwar period. Before, in the early Swedish welfare state, help for such people was based on philanthropic initiative and minor state subsidies. The early efforts were focused on the field of education, and were influenced by models from central Europe.

The modernization of care of the feeble-minded in Malmöhus province led to both inclusion and exclusion. The first educational settings for such pupils were boarding schools. The primary school system had no space for children who were seen as deviant and thus a hindrance for the learning of average gifted children. The further development of a general education system resulted in internal diversifying processes. External differentiation was the way to handle pupil's mixed learning abilities. In the 1920s so-called a- and b-classes as well as different special classes were founded in Malmö. Within the help classes a specific group notably, slow learning pupils, were identified as being feeble-minded and hence separated into external classes. These classes, however, gained increasing acceptance by parents and teachers. They can be seen as forerunners for today’s Swedish special school for children with mental disabilities.

In the first half of 20th century feeble-minded children were taught some reading and writing, but the emphasis was to a growing extent on practical skills. However, some of those young people, stigmatised as being uneducable, did not even have the chance to receive any kind of education. They had to stay in their parents’ homes, others were placed in care homes, or – if not other opportunities existed – to communal poorhouses. Irrespective of any establishments, there was an enormous shortage of places during the entire time period of 1900–1950.

Exclusion from the regular education system resulted in marginalisation in adult life. It was almost impossible for feeble-minded persons to get into the labour market. Only a small number of boarding school alumni could live and work within the so-called controlled family care, often poorly paid as unskilled workers on farms. In the first half of the 20th century, the majority of the feeble-minded spent their lives in working homes or similar institutions separated from ordinary societal life. It became obvious, and not only in Sweden, that the social dimension of citizenship was called into question (Ravaud & Stiker, 2001: 511).

Even in the time-period of this study, an increasing intensity of utilitarian motives for education and care of the feeble-minded can be observed. The traditional objective to educate these pupils to be useful members of the society gained top priority. It legitimated expenditures for those deviant persons, and should hence contribute to normalize their lives. This interpretation of normality had deep roots in the Swedish society and was linked with the upcoming eugenic ideology. A mantra in the modernizing state was that everybody had to be productive and socially useful. This attitude resulted in blindness for the social and emotional needs of persons stigmatised as feeble-minded and founded its expression in acceptance and approval of sterilization practices.
In an earlier study on care of the feeble-minded, the development from the late 19th to the mid 20th century was interpreted as a change from an optimistic to a pessimistic view (Söder, 1978). In the 1970s, this critique was undoubtedly necessary to overcome the traditional system of boarding schools and homes. Nowadays, more than 30 years later and based on archives and literature research, it is appropriate to nuance this perspective. Formative for the first half of the 20th century was not pessimism, but a new type of optimism characterized by rationalism and a positivistic belief in progress. It was an epoch aiming at building up a modern and better society, but accompanied by some contradictions. For the people who were not able to take part in this project of modernization, and those who could not fulfill the norms of society, these were dire straits – they had to live as undesirable citizens.

References


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