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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FRAMEWORK BEING IMPLEMENTED IN SWEDEN: THE ESSUNGA MODEL

Mark Stuart McInnes[i]
University of New England,
Australia

Abstract:
This study critically examines Sweden's Essunga model as an exemplar of inclusive education implementation within a decentralised governance structure. Despite Sweden's legislative commitment to equity through the Education Act 2010 and Discrimination Act 2008, municipal autonomy has created fragmented interpretations of inclusive practice. The Essunga Municipality transformed from ranking 287th nationally in 2007 to third place by 2010, achieving 96% student goal attainment and 100% secondary education eligibility through a comprehensive inclusive framework. This two-phase methodological analysis explores the conceptual foundations of Sweden's inclusive education policy and examines the practical implementation of the Essunga model through relational pedagogy, collaborative teaching structures, and elimination of deficit-based categorisation. Key enablers included strong leadership, multi-professional collaboration, student voice integration, and evidence-based professional development. The model rejected diagnostic gatekeeping, embedded special needs educators within mainstream classrooms, and fostered community-anchored support systems. However, significant barriers to replication persist, including policy ambiguity, inadequate teacher preparation, neoliberal marketisation pressures, and the model's dependence on small-scale context. While the Essunga model demonstrates that locally driven inclusive reform can yield substantial academic and social outcomes, systemic constraints limit national and international transferability without coordinated policy frameworks linking legislative intent with relational pedagogical practice.

Keywords: inclusive education, Essunga model, relational pedagogy, special needs education, educational reform

1. Introduction

Internationally, the idea of inclusive education (IE) has little cohesion or general harmony of its actual meaning, with rhetoric talk from politicians about how positive the impact

[i] Correspondence: email markmcinnes@hotmail.co.uk, mmcinne5@myune.edu.au

of IE is (Corbett, 2001; Dyson, 2001; Magnússon, 2020; Persson, 2012; Tomlinson, 1995). Persson (2012) suggests that IE ensures that students are engaged in their learning with a sense of togetherness and is not merely about the physical location of where a student learns. This project will critically examine an inclusive framework implemented in an international school system, namely the Essunga model in Sweden. Inclusive education in Sweden is embedded in legislation through the Education Act 2010 which stipulates that education is provided equitably and that education is available to all students in mainstream regular classroom, which also aligns to the legacy of the Index for Inclusion by Booth and Ainscow (2011), (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, [EASNIE] n.d.a.; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Magnússon, 2019; Persson, 2012; Wirz & Donde, 2009).

The analysis considers the conceptual foundations of Sweden's IE policy and how relational pedagogy, student rights and legal frameworks have shaped inclusive ideals within the Essunga Model, along with decentralised governance from political influence and school administration (Diskriminerings Ombudsman, 2008; EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Miškolci *et al.*, 2021; Persson, 2012). One of Sweden's smallest municipalities with three elementary schools, one high school and poor educational outcomes, Essunga rapidly transformed from bottom-tier performance to top national rankings between 2007 and 2010, largely attributed to its inclusive, relational ethos (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE], 2013; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b; Persson, 2012). The study critically evaluates how inclusion is implemented within the Swedish context by using the Essunga Model as an example of municipal reform and excellence. It examines enablers and barriers across professional roles, student participation, and policy-practice alignment.

This paper utilises a two-phase methodological approach comprising conceptual framing and an implementation study to examine these dynamics. The conceptual framing draws on policy sources including the Swedish Education Act 2010 and the Discrimination Act 2008 (Diskriminerings Ombudsman, 2008; EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.; Göransson *et al.*, 2015), alongside critical frameworks, for example, the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), analysing how inclusive ideals are constructed through relational pedagogy and a rights-based governance. The study synthesises peer-reviewed literature documenting Sweden's inclusive reform efforts in Essunga (Allan & Persson, 2016; Göransson *et al.*, 2015), and assesses practical enablers and constraints. These include cross-sector policy coordination (Janlöv *et al.*, 2023), teacher preparation gaps (Miškolci, 2021), and neoliberal influences on school choice (Göransson *et al.*, 2017). The thematic clusters are examined against both Swedish statutory mandates and comparative international research (Keles *et al.*, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; Tah *et al.*, 2024; Takala *et al.*, 2020), allowing for policy-contextualised evaluation of inclusive education enactment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Legislative Foundations

Sweden's education system has long been rooted in a social ethos, shaped by equity, inclusion, and social justice principles underpinning its welfare model (Allan & Persson, 2016; Berhanu, 2011). Historically, Sweden has had high taxation with a policy of high welfare spending to promote social equality and equity (Berhanu, 2011). Such a policy has promoted the idea that all learners should have equal access to quality education regardless of their ability, background, or circumstance. The Education Act 2010 affirms that this right extends to all students through equitable support mechanisms with a right to education in mainstream education setting (EASNIE n.d.a.), while the Discrimination Act 2008 reinforces obligations to actively prevent exclusion and marginalisation (Diskriminerings Ombudsman, 2008) placing an obligation on schools to adapt to suit the needs of the student (Allan & Persson, 2016; Berhanu, 2011).

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education highlights that inclusion in Sweden is not considered an additional need but embedded in Sweden's historical democratic participation and human rights (EASNIE n.d.a.). Berhanu (2011, p. 130) highlights Sweden's 'A school for all' policy from the 1960s to the 1980s as a pivotal contributor to inclusive education, placing students at the centre of learning. Unfortunately, reforms in the late twentieth century introduced decentralisation and marketisation, influenced by neoliberal ideology. However, rhetoric and policy still place inclusive education at Sweden's foundational equity goals; it is now surrounded by tensions, dilemmas and contradictions around its implementation (Allan & Persson, 2016; Berhanu, 2011; EADSNE, 2013; Miškolci *et al*., 2021; OECD, 2023).

Sweden's education system is underpinned by a decentralised governance model, whereby municipalities hold the legal responsibility for educational provision, as defined in the Education Act 2010 (EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.). This decentralisation was accelerated by the communalisation reforms in the early 1990s, which led to significant disparities in how inclusion is conceptualised and operated across regions (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Berhanu, 2011; OECD, 2023). While local autonomy can encourage contextual responsiveness, it also weakens national oversight, resulting in fragmented interpretations of a learner's right to support (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Berhanu, 2011; EADSNE, 2013; EASNIE n.d.b.; OECD, 2023). According to the Education Act 2010, schools must promote all learners' development through mainstream settings wherever possible, with provisions for additional support when learners do not meet minimal proficiency levels. However, the Index for Inclusion cautions that decentralisation without universal equity benchmarks can enable institutional bias and discretionary exclusions, especially for learners with disabilities or migration backgrounds (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Sweden's education system is underpinned by a decentralised governance model, wherein municipalities are legally responsible for the provision of education, as defined in the Education Act 2010 (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Berhanu, 2011; EASNIE n.d.a.; OECD, 2023; Persson, 2016). Booth and Ainscow (1998) argue that decentralisation enables

responsiveness to local contexts, addressing the 'messiness' of practice in diverse educational settings. Unfortunately, decentralisation has instead fostered a discourse of inconsistency with trends against equity and equality (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; OECD, 2023). However, Allan and Persson (2016) show that decentralisation has created the conditions for localised success in the Essunga model, which operates in this fragmented context, but transformed its outcomes by embedding inclusive norms and values.

In the 1990s, education reform in Sweden introduced marketisation through market-oriented school choice, competitive benchmarking with high-stakes standardised testing and a voucher system for independent schools. This reform fundamentally changed the conception of education for all as a collective right due to neoliberal influences (Berhanu, 2011; OECD, 2023). Notwithstanding the legal obligation of the Education Act 2010 to provide education in regular classrooms (EASNIE n.d.a.), the neoliberal influence has stratified access, especially affecting students with disabilities, migration backgrounds, or lower socioeconomic status (Barow & Berhanu, 2021). Allan and Persson's (2012) study demonstrates that neoliberal influences can be resisted by ensuring a pedagogical approach that embeds inclusive practices, dismantling disjointed resourcing models, and replacing competitive metrics with community and social capital values. Therefore, confirming that inclusivity within a marketised discourse with strong leadership and evidence-based research can yield elevated student outcomes emotionally, socially and academically (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Persson, 2012).

Göransson *et al.* (2017) highlight how decentralisation and marketisation have yielded Sweden's fragmented inclusion policy landscape. Barow & Berhanu (2021) argue that the Education Act 2010 does not provide a unified operational definition of inclusion, leading to inconsistent application across municipalities, which is supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020), which concedes that internationally there is little cohesion or clarification over what the definition of inclusion is. While the EASNIE (n.d.b.) and OECD (2023) caution that local discretion creates flexibility, it can also lead to a fragmented implementation and hinder systematic reform, which Booth and Ainscow (2011) warn of, that without national coherence, small pockets of excellence may be unsustainable. The Essunga model challenges this assumption by demonstrating sustained success through locally embedded inclusive practices. Allan and Persson (2016) illustrate how strong localisation can surpass fragmentation through evidence-based shared norms and values of inclusion, leadership continuity, and strategic collaborative teaching. In Essunga, students internalised inclusive norms and demonstrated linking social capital. The Essunga model demonstrates that an embodiment of policy coherence emerging from practice rather than legislation can wield remarkable outcomes (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Göransson *et al.*, 2017).

2.2 Health System, Disability Definitions, and Early Intervention

Inclusion permeates Swedish education policy, which is not simply rhetorical but operationalised through multi-tiered collaboration embedded in statutory obligations and practice (EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.). As Janlöv *et al.* (2023) describe, Sweden's integrated education-health model is grounded in legal obligations through multi-agency collaboration. These legal obligations mandate that joint planning occurs between health professionals and schools, fostering a preventative, relational framework. This policy framework upholds personalised accessibility and support as a collective duty rather than segregated functions. EASNIE (n.d.b.) and Persson (2012) highlight how this integration aims to support those with special needs in the general education classroom setting. However, policy tensions have emerged. The OECD (2014) cautions that the rise of neuropsychiatric diagnoses and inconsistent coordination across municipalities risk reverting to passive support models, undermining active inclusion. The documented rise in neuropsychiatric diagnoses reflects a medicalised approach to student behaviour, often reinforcing deficit-based categorisation (Berhanu, 2011; Kazda *et al.*, 2021; Klau *et al.*, 2017; Lanas & Brunila, 2019). These concerns echo the broader critiques of fragmented implementation stemming from decentralisation and marketisation (Berhanu, 2011; Barow & Berhanu, 2021). In practice, the Essunga model of reform exemplifies these values. A multi-disciplined team of teachers, students, municipal leaders, strong school leadership, nurses, social workers, school councillors, educational psychologists and the community collectively rebuilt an inclusive system where support is embedded, not marginalised (Allan & Persson, 2016; EADSNE, 2013). Therefore, this demonstrates the influence of legislation and its enactment in relational, community-anchored practice. Although challenges persist in Sweden, the rejection of categorisation, reliance on early intervention, and whole-school responsibility in the Essunga model signals a paradigm shift from deficit logics to strengths-based inclusion that is rooted in both normative values and statutory compliance on a foundation of democratic participation (Allan & Persson, 2016; Berhanu, 2011; Barow & Berhanu, 2021; European Commission, 2018a, European Commission, 2018b; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Göransson *et al.*, 2011; Miškolci *et al.*, 2021; Persson, 2012).

Despite Sweden's legislative emphasis on equitable, needs-based support, notable ambiguities persist regarding disability classification and eligibility thresholds for specialised provision (Berhanu, 2011; EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.; OECD, 2023; OECD, 2014). The Discrimination Act 2008 defines disability broadly and requires that reasonable accessibility measures be provided, but leaves implementation open to interpretation across municipalities (Diskriminerings Ombudsman, 2008). At the same time, the Education Act 2010 frames support as a right linked to academic outcomes rather than diagnostic categorisation. However, in practice, medical labels often gatekeep access to interventions and support (EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.; Kazda *et al.*, 2021; Klau *et al.*, 2017; Lanas & Brunila, 2019). This inequality is compounded by a marked rise in neuropsychiatric diagnoses, particularly ADHD and autism spectrum conditions (Kazda *et al.*, 2021; Klau *et al.*, 2017; Lanas & Brunila, 2019), which the OECD (2014) suggests may reflect systemic tendencies towards over-pathologising learners' behaviour

in place of pedagogical adaptation. Keles *et al.* (2024) add that fragmented jurisdiction and inconsistent resourcing delay access to early support, undermining the law's intent. While national policy often requires a formal diagnosis to trigger access to support (OECD, 2014; Keles *et al.*, 2024), the Essunga model deliberately eliminated this prerequisite by using multi-professional collaboration as supported by Göransson *et al.* (2015), who suggest that an inclusive education setting should seek to avoid categorisation. The Essunga model's responsive educational discourse enabled differentiated pedagogy and curriculum delivery without diagnostic gatekeeping (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a). Students previously placed in segregated ability groups were mainstreamed into heterogeneous classes, and supported through co-teaching and flexible structures that did not rely on categorisation (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; Persson, 2012). Janlöv *et al.* (2023) describe a fragmented early support system. In comparison, the Essunga model prioritised early, multidisciplinary intervention without waiting for formal diagnosis or classification, instead acting on need and observation (European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b).

2.3 Origins and Conceptual Features

The Essunga Municipality was one of Sweden's worst-performing education municipalities in 2007. At that time, the municipality was ranked 287 nationally in Sweden, with only sixty-two per cent of students achieving the nationally set goals in all subjects. By 2010, the municipality was ranked third in the country with ninety-six per cent of students achieving set goals in all subjects. Similarly, a further indication of the model's success is the percentage of students eligible for secondary education. In 2007, Essunga Municipality was ranked 289 in the country. By 2010, it had transformed into the top-ranked municipality in the country, with one hundred per cent of students eligible for secondary education. Furthermore, the Essunga Municipality performs far superior with forty-seven per cent in comparison to the Swedish average of twenty-three per cent when comparing the employed labour statistic (Allan & Persson, 2016; EADSNE, 2013; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b).

Essunga's transformation stemmed from a deliberate framework of social capital that incorporated collaboration between students, educators, municipal leaders, school leadership, and families (Allan & Persson, 2016). Allan and Persson (2016) suggest that the Essunga model promoted student engagement and knowledge sharing, creating relational partnerships that emerge as counterweights to the structural deficiencies seen in other Swedish municipalities due to decentralisation. Ekstrand (2015) and Taneja-Johansson (2024) underline that inclusion becomes a lived reality rather than a rhetorical objective when students' voices are actively harnessed through relational engagement and empathetic pedagogies. In the Essunga model, these practices have translated into measurable improvements in academic and social outcomes for all students (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b).

The decentralisation of education in Sweden is viewed as a barrier to systemic coherence of inclusive education due to local municipalities having the autonomy to

interpret national policy and legislation (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Berhanu, 2011). For example, the Swedish Education Act 2010 stipulates that equitable access and early support are provided, but in non-prescriptive wording, resulting in unequal implementation (EASNIE n.d.b.). However, the Essunga model navigated this decentralisation to its advantage by embedding shared norms, reflective professional learning, and evidence-led development (European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b). The school board delegated full autonomy to a school principal to decrease absenteeism and improve outcomes. Strong leadership ensured the implementation of evidence-based frameworks, including the rejection of student categorisation through a medical lens, the promotion of co-responsibility between staff and students, and foregrounded in building strong teacher–student relationships based on strong values and norms of inclusivity (Allan & Persson, 2016; Ekstrand, 2015; European Commission, 2018b; Persson, 2012). In rejecting deficit-based segregation by structurally repositioning all learners within the general education classroom aligns with Booth and Ainscow's Index dimensions of inclusive cultures and evolving practices (Allan & Persson, 2016; Miškolci *et al.*, 2021).

2.4 Analysis of Implementation

The Essunga model demonstrates a reform journey built on inclusivity, whereby occupational role clarity and collaborative practice were actively cultivated to counter longstanding ambiguity in inclusive enactment (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018b). Göransson *et al.* (2017) suggest that special needs educators (SNEs) and classroom teachers often provide inconsistent support due to overlapping responsibilities and a lack of collaboration. However, the Essunga model addressed this issue by introducing a new structure that abolished segregated special education groups and introduced all students into the main classroom discourse. Under this structure, SNEs and classroom teachers worked collaboratively, jointly teaching in shared spaces, repositioning SNEs as integral pedagogical partners (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018b). The new structure provided flexible role fluidity, shared responsibility, and immediate support available to all students. While such a reform demands rigorous professional development, as highlighted by Miškolci *et al.* (2021), the Essunga model embraced this by ensuring rigorous research engagement by all staff, which the principal in charge spearheaded. The notion of collective reflection was encouraged, aligning practice with values enshrined in Booth and Ainscow's (2011) Index for Inclusion (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b). Although Takala *et al.* (2020) highlight that Finland has a more formalised occupational role alignment, the Essunga model demonstrates that clarity and collaboration can be locally enacted with legislative support.

Ekstrand (2015) and Taneja-Johansson (2024) emphasise that empathetic relational engagement fosters student belonging and academic resilience. This sense of student belonging allowed student participation and knowledge partnerships to be mechanisms for sustainability and normative embedding, becoming a key component of the Essunga model's success. Structurally, a cultural change was developed whereby learner voice

was formalised through student councils and embedded feedback opportunities, along with building and sustaining strong teacher-student relationships. This cultural change promoted operationalising an inclusive culture aligning with the Index for Inclusion (Allan & Persson, 2016; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b).

To ensure the model's sustainability and continued success, a micro-level of knowledge partnerships was built through sustained collaboration among school leaders, teachers, and external researchers, a model in line with Sigurðardóttir *et al.*'s (2018) relational connection framework. This framework stipulates that a sustained cultural change can only occur when systematic professional development based on research evidence, supported by a central framework and trust placed in the school to be responsible for delivering support that will enable all students to reach their full potential (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b; EADSNE, 2013). The Essunga model also prefigures the key findings from the Australian Institute for Teacher and School Leadership (AITSL, 2022) report on building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce, emphasising relational competencies and cross-disciplinary engagement in a culturally responsive practice.

3. Discussion

3.1 Benefits and Drawbacks

The Essunga model of inclusive education demonstrates significant benefits across student engagement, academic achievement, systemic equity, and the development of social capital, which will provide students with lifelong benefits by providing them with the confidence to seek support from hierarchical powers (Allan & Persson, 2016). Central to the Essunga's model success has been the development of a thought style based on inclusion as the principle of all teaching and learning, and the relational school culture that significantly improved attendance, academic performance and a sense of belonging through trust-based learning environments (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018b; EADSNE, 2013; Persson, 2012; Sigurðardóttir *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the move from segregation defined by ability and medical deficit lens to a whole-school culture and responsibility marks a systemic reorientation, whereby inclusion is embedded in mainstream general education, opposed to external special settings (Allan & Persson, 2016; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Persson, 2012). At the same time, student agency has played a pivotal role and incorporated student voice and an inclusive ethos into decision-making to foster sustained engagement and belonging, placing students at the centre of their learning (Berhanu, 2011; Ekstrand, 2015). In dismantling an ability-based group structure to promote heterogeneous groups through co-teaching, the Essunga model reframed accountability from individualised to a collaborative pedagogical responsibility. This shift eliminated marginalisation and created a shared sense of ownership and belonging, with high expectations of all students as capable learners (Allan & Persson, 2016; European Commission, 2018b; Persson, 2012). The Essunga model created an inclusive education as a relational, participatory, and equitable

framework that provided tangible improvements in attendance, achievement, and systemic belonging (Allan & Persson, 2016; EADSNE, 2013; European Commission, 2018b; Persson, 2012).

While the Essunga model has demonstrated real success in embedding inclusive pedagogies, critical limitations constrain its scalability and systemic influence elsewhere. Ekstrand (2015) cautions that the Essunga Municipality's small population and unified political administration structure enabled alignment between policy and practice. Replication of the Essunga model in Australia is constrained by differing legislative frameworks, including the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Australian Government, 2005; Australian Government, 1992). Furthermore, the structural makeup of education in Australia differs significantly from that of Sweden, with state control of education, as opposed to local responsibility. Magnússon (2020) highlights the recent emergence of resource schools in Sweden, structured as separate support for neurodivergent students, raising concerns about the sustainability of the Essunga model and a regression towards segregation. At the same time, persistent policy ambiguity impairs consistent practice.

Role confusion and ambiguity between SNEs, classroom teachers and support staff hinder coherent intervention (Göransson *et al.*, 2017). Some staff members' resistance due to deficit-based paradigms remained, and strong leadership was required to navigate this hurdle (Allan & Persson, 2016; Berhanu, 2011; Göransson *et al.*, 2017; Persson, 2012). While the Essunga model instilled a deliberate ethos of professional learning supported by evidence-based research, standard professional development remains inconsistent, with some educators inadequately prepared to navigate inclusion (Miškolci *et al.*, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Together, these drawbacks illustrate the limitations of Essunga's model as a universally transferable solution to inclusive education.

3.2 Obstacles to Implementation

The decentralised governance structure of Sweden's education system presents a fundamental obstacle to replicating the Essunga model. While the Education Act 2010 mandates that equity and early support are provided, its discretionary language leads to a wide variation in implementation across municipalities (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; EASNIE n.d.a.; EASNIE n.d.b.). The inconsistent implementation of equity and inclusiveness across municipalities leads to poorly applied pedagogical approaches (Berhanu, 2011; Göransson *et al.*, 2015; Göransson *et al.*, 2017). Berhanu (2011) further identifies entrenched deficit-based paradigms within legislative interpretation as a systemic barrier, noting that inclusive principles are frequently undermined by diagnostic gatekeeping that follows the medical lens approach. Compounding this deficit lens, Miškolci *et al.* (2021) and UNESCO (2020) argue that teaching and learning in Sweden suffer from fragmented inclusivity frameworks, leaving many educators underprepared to navigate the demands of responsive pedagogy across diverse contexts. Sigurðardóttir *et al.* (2018) argue that structured knowledge partnerships between schools and universities to support professional development are essential to ensure inclusive frameworks are instilled in education, particularly where institutional culture outweighs

the innovation seen by the Essunga model. Collectively, these challenges hinder widespread enactment of inclusive pedagogy as witnessed in the Essunga model when applied outside of a small local context such as Essunga Municipality.

Cultural contradictions between equity-focused legislation and neoliberal schooling norms further complicate the implementation of the Essunga model nationally or internationally. The rise of neoliberal influence in the form of school choice and a results-driven market competition has stratified educational success, undermining inclusive approaches (Allan & Persson, 2016; Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Göransson *et al.*, 2017; OECD, 2023; Mutuota, 2024). While the Essunga model rejected categorising students and embedded all learners into mainstream classrooms, other municipalities continue to adopt segregative models. These localised interpretations of Sweden's Education Act 2010 preserve marginalisation through structural separation, which is also seen internationally (Allan & Persson, 2016; EASNIE n.d.a.; Keles *et al.*, 2024; Tah *et al.*, 2024). These tensions reflect a clash between universalist goals and an individualised market often reinforced by parent preferences and political pressure (Allan & Persson, 201; Berhanu, 2011; Mutuota, 2024).

Despite Sweden's integrated health and education model being mandated under the Education Act 2010, Janlöv *et al.* (2023) show that implementation varies drastically, with some municipalities lacking cross-sectoral coordination. Without a coherent framework for collaboration as implemented by the Essunga model for joint planning and delivery of education, then inclusivity will not succeed (Persson, 2012). The Essunga model delivered collaboration between teachers, social services, parents, local community and health professionals, which is hard to replicate and context-dependent (Allan & Persson, 2016; Göransson *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the Essunga model's success is difficult to replicate elsewhere and requires systemic contradictions and a counterbalance of neoliberal and bureaucratic pressures.

4. Conclusion

The success of the Essunga model underpins how inclusion can directly improve results from the ground up through a relational pedagogical approach and community-led reform grounded in evidence-based research. Essunga's model is rooted in collaboration, strong leadership, trust-based pedagogy, relevant curriculum and student voice, which has increased attendance and improved academic results. More importantly, it has created a true cultural shift among students and teachers to create an educational discourse of feeling valued (Allan & Persson, 2016; Ekstrand, 2015). By instilling a whole-school approach that embraced inclusive values without relying on the deficit medical lens perspective of diverse learners, the Essunga model demonstrates that relational frameworks can yield data-driven outcomes, irrespective of neoliberal influence (Allan & Persson, 2016; Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Berhanu, 2011; Ekstrand, 2015). These outcomes align with the domains of the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), cultivating inclusive cultures and developing participatory practices. There are also parallel findings from AITSL's Building a Culturally Responsive Australian Teaching Workforce report

(AITSL, 2022), which promotes a pedagogical approach that is context-responsive and curriculum-relevant to create a culturally safe learning environment for all learners.
However, despite the Essunga model's localised success, national or international replication remains hindered by systemic constraints. Ambiguity and differing legislation allow discretionary implementation of various pedagogical approaches (Barow & Berhanu, 2021). Additionally, fragmented initial teacher education pathways leave many pre-service teachers underprepared and insufficiently skilled to foster inclusive environments (Miškolci *et al.*, 2021). UNESCO (2020) and Sigurðardóttir *et al.* (2018) emphasise that without sustained professional development and collaboration between interested parties, including education, health, social care, family and community, inclusive values risk becoming rhetorical rather than enacted. To bridge these obstacles, a coordinated policy framework that links legislative intent, strong leadership and relational pedagogy is required to build and sustain a culturally responsive education discourse. In doing so, the Essunga model could be replicated elsewhere, resisting the deficit paradigms and embedding equity as the norm instead.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Mark McInnes brings a unique perspective to inclusive education, shaped by an extraordinary career transition from community service to educational practice. After 25 years in policing, where he dedicated himself to supporting and protecting the community, Mark recognised an opportunity to create even greater impact by working with young people during their formative years. This realisation led him to transition into primary education, where he could intervene earlier in children's lives and help shape positive futures. Mark's passion centres on inclusive education and ensuring every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances. He believes that education is the cornerstone of social equity and that all learners deserve access to quality, supportive learning environments where they feel valued and capable. Currently pursuing a Master of Education (Special and Inclusive) at the University of New England, Australia, Mark combines his extensive

community engagement experience with evidence-based pedagogical practice. His research interests focus on inclusive frameworks, relational pedagogy, and practical strategies for embedding equity in mainstream educational settings. Mark's unique journey from policing to education enriches his understanding of systemic support, collaborative practice, and the importance of building trusting relationships to foster student success and wellbeing.

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