Education and Social Integration
SECONDARY EDUCATION IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Contents

Series Editors' Foreword vii
Acknowledgment x

1 The Uneven Development of Comprehensive Education in Scandinavia, Germany, and England 1
2 The Conglomerate Education System: The Integrative Role of the State 19
3 Social Class Formation and Educational Participation 49
4 Liberal Politics: The Early Beginnings of Comprehensive Education 75
5 Social Democratic Politics: The Advancement of Comprehensive Education 127
6 Comprehensive Education Consolidated 167
7 Conclusion 211

Bibliography 233
Author Index 243
Subject Index 245
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Among the educational issues affecting policy makers, public officials, and citizens in modern, democratic and industrial societies, none has been more contentious than the role of secondary schooling. In establishing the Secondary Education in a Changing World series with Palgrave Macmillan, our intent is to provide a venue for scholars in different national settings to explore critical and controversial issues surrounding secondary education. We envision our series as a place for the airing, and hopefully resolution, of these controversial issues.

More than a century has elapsed since Emile Durkheim argued the importance of studying secondary education as a unity, rather than in relation to the wide range of subjects and the division of pedagogical labor of which it was composed. Only thus, he insisted, would it be possible to have the ends and aims of secondary education constantly in view. The failure to do so accounted for a great deal of the difficulty with which secondary education was faced. First, it meant that secondary education was “intellectually disorientated,” between “a past which is dying and a future which is still undecided,” and as a result “lacks the vigor and vitality which it once possessed” (Durkheim 1938/1977, 8). Second, the institutions of secondary education were not understood adequately in relation to their past, which was “the soil which nourished them and gave them their present meaning, and apart from which they cannot be examined without a great deal of impoverishment and distortion” (10). And third, it was difficult for secondary school teachers, who were responsible for putting policy reforms into practice, to understand the nature of the problems and issues that prompted them.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, Durkheim’s strictures still have resonance. The intellectual disorientation of secondary education is more evident than ever as it is caught up in successive waves of policy changes. The connections between the present and the past have become increasingly hard to trace and untangle. Moreover, the distance
between policy makers on the one hand and the practitioners on the other has rarely seemed as immense as it is today. The key mission of the current series of books is, in the spirit of Durkheim, to address these underlying dilemmas of secondary education and to play a part in resolving them.

In *Education and Social Integration: Comprehensive Education in Europe*, Susanne Wiborg explores the emergence and development of comprehensive education in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), England, and Germany from the eighteenth century to the present. Her intent is to develop a theory of what she sees as the uneven development of comprehensive education in these countries. As Wiborg sees it, different regions in Europe have developed very different systems of schooling with differing degrees of comprehensiveness. The Scandinavian countries, she argues, were able early on to develop an integrated and unified system of elementary and secondary education that involved all children notwithstanding their social class background. England and Germany were only able to do this on the elementary level. Both countries developed and continue to maintain selective systems of secondary education.

There were, according to Wiborg, four factors that may explain this pattern of uneven development: (1) nineteenth-century state formation, (2) the type of class structure that evolved in these countries during the nineteenth century, (3) the nature of liberal politics and the partnerships that Liberals in these different countries established with other parties, and (4) the nature of social democracy and the alliances that Social Democrats established in these different countries. In the remainder of the volume, Wiborg develops and tests hypotheses involving these factors that may have promoted or prevented the development of comprehensive education. The key to understanding this uneven development, she concludes, is to be found in the strength of social democratic political parties and in the alliances that they were able to establish with liberal parties. The Scandinavian countries had developed strong democratic parties that were able to form alliances with liberal parties, and as a consequence they were able to develop comprehensive systems of schooling. In England and Germany the social democratic parties were weaker, and it proved difficult for Social Democrats to form partnerships with Liberals. The result, she maintains, was the failure of comprehensive schooling in Germany and its partial success in England.

*Education and Social Integration* is the sixth volume to be published in our series. More so than earlier books, Wiborg’s work is decidedly comparative and illustrates how such a perspective enhances our
understanding of the development of secondary education. As we see the trajectory of the series advancing during the next few years, our intent is to seek additional volumes that bring this comparative viewpoint to studies in secondary education.

*Barry Franklin and Gary McCulloch*
Acknowledgment

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Chapter 1

The Uneven Development of Comprehensive Education in Scandinavia, Germany, and England

Introduction

The comprehensive school has been proclaimed “dead” by many commentators and politicians, particularly in the English-speaking countries (Franklin and McCulloch, 2007). Where not officially discarded, the idea and the term have often been quietly forgotten. So, why return now to this relic of the past, which in many countries is no longer the cynosure of politicians and policy-makers? Why should we be concerned with this supposedly outmoded idea, with its unmistakable flavor of 1970s social idealism, instead of focussing on how education can increase aggregate national skills and promote economic competitiveness? This book argues that there are powerful reasons to look again at comprehensive education and its social benefits. As Mark Twain might have said, rumors of its death may have been widely exaggerated.

Over the last twenty-five years, governments, especially in the UK and the United States, have increasingly argued that education must become responsive to the needs of the market. In the UK, a radical restructuring of the school system was initiated in the early 1980s in which major reforms ensured the infusion of market forces into public sector provision. Education was developed as a market commodity driven by consumer
demands working through league tables, parental choice, and market competition between schools. Policies of school choice and school diversification have led to an increasingly fragmented school system. Beginning in 1988, the central government imposed a national curriculum with distinct barriers between academic, technical, and practical learning. Setting students according to academic ability was reinforced as a selective mechanism throughout the entire school system. These neoliberal initiatives, which are still being carried forward by the current government, have been taken in the belief that they would raise the national level of academic achievement and skill formation and so promote economic competitiveness.

This has, not surprisingly, led to further social inequality and cultural fragmentation of society. When poor exam results from schools were published in a league table, it immediately created a negative reputation and led to the flight of the more resourceful parents. Vacancies were created and filled by pupils excluded from other schools. Hence, a widening gap was occurring between schools that increasingly performed better and schools that gradually did worse. An OECD study (2007), based on the PISA data for 2006, provided evidence for this when it concluded that greater social segregation in school intakes increases educational inequality; by contrast, increasing the heterogeneity of intakes and narrowing the gaps between schools reduces social inequality. It argued that many English-speaking and German-speaking countries had considerably higher segregation in school intakes, leading to higher levels of educational and social inequality. Conversely, the Nordic countries, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, had a far more socially heterogeneous intake in schools and narrower gaps between the schools, resulting in lower inequality in educational outcomes.

Green et al. (2006) have stressed, on the basis of this, that it is not a coincidence that the Nordic countries with higher levels of social and economic equality also have more egalitarian school systems than the English-speaking and German-speaking countries. In England, comprehensive education is incomplete and differentiated, and in the German-speaking countries comprehensive education has never been introduced, instead a selective secondary, tripartite school system is maintained. “In terms of education systems factors” they state, “what the more equal countries have in common, which is absent in the less equal countries, are structures and processes typically associated with radical versions of comprehensive education: non-selective schools, mixed ability classes, late subject specialization and measures to equalize resources between schools. That these features should work towards lowering educational inequality should be no mystery” (138).
Since policy-makers have been increasingly concerned about raising academic standards and aggregate skills for economic competitiveness, the question of social equality has inevitably been placed on the periphery of the educational agenda. However, there is a need to return social inequality to the top of the agenda as societies have become increasingly unequal. Globalization has engendered forces that have dislocated traditional bonds, fragmented societies, and reinforced conflict and division. Antisocial behavior, xenophobia, racial intolerance, and community breakdown are some of the problems schools are facing as a result. To accommodate these problems, there is a need to look at egalitarian schooling as a kind of “glue” that can hold society together. Comprehensive education, which is the only egalitarian form of schooling, has proven to reduce social inequality and enhance cultural cohesion in society. Green et al. (2006) argue therefore that it is no longer just a desirable type of education but a necessary vehicle for creating social cohesion (18). It is for this very reason that comprehensive education must be brought back to our attention. Comprehensive education is not a panacea for all societal ills, but it is the only type of education at our disposal that can reduce the fragmentation of society and enhance social cohesion in the future.

It is also important to stress that not only can comprehensive education enhance social cohesion, but also simultaneously uphold academic standards. There has been a widespread, unfounded belief that academic standards and social equality are incompatible. However, the PISA studies debunked this belief when they demonstrated empirically that many of the countries with the highest overall levels of academic achievement are also countries with relatively equal outcomes. Finland is the best example of this, but also are the other Nordic countries (185). The issue of reconciling academic standards and social equality is not a new phenomenon. Since the late nineteenth century, policy-makers in Europe have been grappling with the issue of creating a school system that would, on one hand, maintain academic standards, whilst, on the other, include all children regardless of social class. It began initially as an attempt to combine the elementary school and the secondary school into a coherent school system. The two schools had been established as completely separate entities. Children of the lower classes received only a rudimentary learning in the elementary schools, whilst the secondary school, based on a classical curriculum, was reserved for children of the upper strata of society. The task was to not only bring together two schools but also merge two very different worlds of social class and academic culture. It was at the very junction of elementary and secondary education that principal issues in national educational policy arose and which eventually sparked the comprehensive school movement. The result of joining these two school types into unified
systems on egalitarian lines varies greatly from era to era and from country to country.

It is the aim of this book to trace this divergent historical development of comprehensive education in Europe. Different regions in Europe have evolved quite different systems of education, some much more comprehensive and integrated than others. In Scandinavia, for example, different types of schools were integrated over time into a unified system in which nearly all children participated regardless of social background. By contrast, other European countries, such as England and Germany, failed to reach a similar level of integration in their school systems. In both countries, elementary schools became largely comprehensive and nonselective, but this was not the case for the secondary schools. In England the lower secondary school system is still officially comprehensive, but selective grammar schools still remain in many areas, in many cases the comprehensive schools themselves are now partially selective as well. In the major cities, comprehensive schooling in its true sense no longer exists. In Germany secondary schools are mostly selective, as a tripartite system has been retained. The aim of this book, therefore, is to understand through comparative historical analysis how and why these major variations have occurred.

The Different Outcomes

Scandinavia

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden share an unusually radical type of comprehensive school system, which can best be defined as an all-through, unselective, public school system with mixed-ability classes covering the entire compulsory school age. Also Finland and Iceland share a similar education structure with the Scandinavian countries. However, only Denmark, Norway, and Sweden will be dealt with in this book, since their histories are intimately interwoven with each other and therefore represent a unit of comparison based on strong similarities. In Scandinavia almost all children, irrespective of social background, attend this comprehensive school for common learning, and every kind of selection is postponed until the upper secondary stage at the age of fifteen to sixteen. Private schools, which in fact have been growing over the last few years, have historically always been a rather small sector. They are not fully independent as they are funded by the state for up to 85 percent of their costs and are subject to state regulation. More importantly, they don’t serve as an elitist bastion
Uneven Development of Education

5
catering to a privileged class, but are egalitarian in nature, being denomina-
national, pedagogical or political in orientation.

The Scandinavian comprehensive school system is mainly a result of three historical events. The first and perhaps the most important event was the breakdown of the parallel school system at the turn of the twentieth century. As in other European countries, the Scandinavian countries developed a parallel system of education during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondary schools with roots back to the Middle Ages were established on the one side and catered mainly to children from the upper classes of the society. These schools, called the Cathedral-, Latin-, or Higher Schools, often in affiliation with the church and later the state, were located in the capitals of Copenhagen, Christiania (later Oslo), and Stockholm, and also in the market towns. On the other side were the elementary schools, which were established in parallel to the secondary schools. They enrolled children from the peasantry and later also from the growing urban working class. This parallel system of education met increasing opposition since it upheld social class differences and failed to prepare talented children from less privileged backgrounds for useful occupations. It was possible for the poor, but academically gifted, child to transfer from the elementary to the secondary school, but the almost insurmountable cleavage between the two school types, which were underpinned by their different aims of schooling, curriculum, and social intakes, made this very rare.

The desire to break down this class-biased school system propelled the comprehensive school movement, which lasted well into the twentieth century. The widespread belief that each social class needed its own type of education to prepare for their occupational role in society was gradually phased out in favor of a desire to create common schooling for all based on pupils’ mental faculties and innate abilities. The “social mixing” this would create in the schools would lead to a more equitable society promoting talents from all walks of life. Common to Scandinavia was that a new school type, the middle school, was used as a means of breaking down the parallel school system. This was done by abolishing the lower part of the secondary school in order to place the middle school in between the elementary school and what was now the upper secondary school. This created a ladder system of education, in which the elementary school, the middle school, and the upper secondary school followed each other successively. The middle school, says the education historian Markussen (2003), created “unity in—and a straight way—through the entire school system.” In such a system the children no longer had to be “captured” in a school defined by social class, but could instead progress through it according to their academic ability and aptitudes (193).
The timing of the introduction of the ladder system of education varied from country to country. In Norway, the middle school was introduced as early as 1869. It was to be of six years duration and based on the three-year elementary school. At the same time, the duration of the secondary school (*gymnasium*) was reduced to three years. In 1889, the middle school was reduced from six to four years in order to extend the duration of the elementary school from three to five years. This was done to strengthen further the ladder system of education. In Denmark, the middle school was introduced thirty-four years later, in 1903. The secondary school (*gymnasium*) was cut down from nine to three years in order to make room for a four-year middle school. Even though the middle school was considered an integral part of the secondary school, middle schools were, nevertheless, created in connection to the elementary school. This happened especially in rural areas where secondary schools did not exist. Sweden was the latest to introduce the middle school, in 1905. The secondary school (*läroverk*) was divided into a six-year middle school, named secondary technical school (*realskola*), and a four-year upper secondary school. Since there were many counties, especially in the sparsely populated rural areas, that did not have a secondary school, a School Act in 1909 ensured the establishment of middle schools also in connection to the elementary schools in these areas. Hence, by the early twentieth century the Scandinavian countries had transformed their parallel system of education into a ladder system of education.

The second event in the introduction of comprehensive education in Scandinavia, which occurred mainly during the interwar period, was, surprisingly, the abolition of the middle school. In fact, the middle school had become rather popular as it allowed talented students from less privileged backgrounds to obtain secondary education. During the interwar period, around a quarter of the youth cohort went to the middle school. However, selection to the middle school creamed off the best-performing pupils, leaving the rest behind in the two top classes of the elementary school (grades six and seven). This came to be regarded as an obstacle for the further development of an egalitarian and cohesive school system. The middle school was therefore abolished in order to avoid the two years of parallel schooling—the top two classes in the elementary school ran next to the bottom two classes of the middle school—in favor of a seven-year comprehensive school.

The middle school was abolished first in Norway, and this happened in two steps, one in 1920 and the next in 1936. It was decided in 1920 that middle schools would receive financial support by the state only if they enrolled pupils who had completed the seven-year comprehensive school. The consequence of this was a reduction of the middle school from
four to two years in order to allow the seven-year comprehensive school to develop. In 1936, the last remnant of the middle school was finally abolished. The five-year secondary school now continued directly from the seven-year comprehensive school. The less academically gifted pupils were enrolled in a three-year secondary technical school (realskole), but the first two classes of the secondary technical school were integrated with the first two classes of the academic secondary school. The common curriculum in the core subjects ensured a strong link between elementary and secondary education.

In Sweden, the middle school was almost abolished in 1927. A so-called “double attachment” was introduced, which implied that, on one hand, a six-year comprehensive school should be followed by a four-year middle school (mostly in small towns) and, on the other, a four-year comprehensive school should be followed by a five-year middle school (mostly in the cities). This upheld the parallel system to some extent, but it was anyway gradually broken down partly due to the abolition of state financial support to the private preparatory schools that fed into the middle schools. In Denmark, the middle school was not abolished until 1958. In fact, during the interwar period, the position of the middle school was strengthened through the creation of a parallel middle school (1937) to serve less academically able children. As such, the parallel system was maintained at the lower secondary stage, but, as in Norway and Sweden, a seven-year comprehensive school was eventually introduced. The striking fact about the abolition of the middle school in Scandinavia was that lower secondary education became fully integrated with elementary education, not secondary education—creating an all-through system of education for seven years. This was extended to nine/ten years during the period of 1962 until 1975. In Norway the nine/ten-year comprehensive school was introduced in 1969, in Sweden a little earlier, in 1962, and latest in Denmark, in 1975.

The third event in the development of comprehensive education in Scandinavia was the introduction of mixed-ability classes throughout the entire nine/ten-year comprehensive school. In all of the Scandinavian countries, both streaming and setting of pupils were, in various ways, implemented in the top two classes (grades eight and nine) in the comprehensive school. However, the concern was that this created a cleavage between the gifted children and the less academically able children. It became increasingly difficult for the children in the nonacademic streams who had enhanced their academic skills to transfer to the academic streams. To ameliorate this problem, mixed-ability classes were introduced throughout the nine/ten-year comprehensive school. In Norway, streaming and setting were abolished in 1974 and mixed-ability classes were implemented. In Sweden, streaming in the top classes of the comprehensive
school was abolished in 1968 and setting was done away with in 1980. In Denmark, streaming was abolished in 1975 and setting in 1993. Today, all the Scandinavian countries have mixed-ability classes throughout their comprehensive school systems. The only way of organizing pupils according to ability is through the so-called “teaching differentiation,” which implies flexible organized ability groupings of restricted duration within the framework of mixed-ability classes (Wiborg, 2004).

England and Germany

The development of education in Germany and England was in sharp contrast to that in the Scandinavian countries. In Germany and England the shift toward more egalitarian schooling only began well after the Second World War, and was also much more limited. There was almost nothing in these two countries prior to the war that was propitious for the development of comprehensive education. Whereas the Scandinavian countries already had embarked on restructuring the school system on egalitarian lines in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in Germany and England the divided education system was maintained. The traditional nine-year secondary school—in Germany the Gymnasium, and the grammar school in England—survived and was retained as a bastion for the middle and upper classes, thus excluding the bulk of the society, comprising the lower classes, who had only a rudimentary learning in elementary schools.

As Leschinsky and Mayer (1999) have stated in regard to Germany, it is remarkable that radical transformations of the German society, such as the change from the Empire to a Republic in 1920, national socialism during the 1930s, or the unification of East and West Germany in 1990, have not had any impact on the structural development of the education system (14). In Germany, next to the Gymnasium was the six-year Realgymnasium, which later, in 1878, became the nine-year Oberrealschule and the more demanding nine-year Realgymnasium. But this school system was not made the subject for reform that would integrate them into an egalitarian system. In 1872, a middle school was in fact established in Germany, but, in contrast to the Scandinavian middle school, it was not developed as a link between elementary and secondary education but rather used as a term that embraced various kinds of higher elementary schools. These schools ran in parallel to the secondary schools. The Gymnasium took most of its pupils from private preparatory schools at the age of nine or ten, although it also drew to some extent on the lower classes in the elementary school, the Volkschulen. However, the elementary school was not seen to serve as the basis for further education.
It was not until 1920 that the elementary school became the foundation of secondary education. Both public and private preparatory schools, Vorschulen feeding in to the Gymnasium, were to be abolished in order to ensure this, but many of these schools still continued to exist until the late 1930s. After the Second World War, the German education system was restored in concordance with the school system of the Weimar republic—a tripartite secondary education system comprising the Gymnasium, Realschule, and Hauptschule, each fed from the four-year elementary school. During the two decades of the 1960s and 1970s, major reform plans were launched that aimed at restructuring the German school system along egalitarian lines. However, none of these plans resulted in major changes to the school system.

The only achievements were minor changes, such as the introduction of the so-called Orientierungstufe. This was a kind of “orientation stage” that was designed to link elementary and secondary schools together and to postpone selection by two years (at age twelve). The other achievement was the establishment of some comprehensive schools, Gesamtschulen, mainly in Northern Germany. However, these schools did not break down the tripartite education system, as they were established in parallel to it as a fourth educational option. Nor has the Gesamtschule ever been popular, certainly not when figures of the enrolment are taken into account. Only about 10 percent of the pupils of a cohort are today attending this type of school. After the unification of Germany, in 1990, the former East German states abandoned their polytechnic comprehensive schools that were introduced after the Second World War in order to adopt the former Western tripartite education system. Some Länder, though, managed to dilute the rigid selection by implementing just a two-type, bipartite system. Even though the elitist gleam to some degree has disappeared from the secondary education system, as more students are enrolled in the Gymnasium and Realschule and less in the traditional low achievers’ Hauptschule than in the past, it still remains a fact that the German system, at least in contrast to Scandinavia, is highly stratified.

In contrast to Germany, in England the selective secondary tripartite system was transformed during the 1960s and 1970s into a comprehensive system. But unlike in Scandinavia, the transformation did not involve creating an all-through primary/lower secondary school. The transfer from elementary to secondary education was in fact initially made nonselective, although selection has, over the last few years, been made acceptable to some degree. But selective grammar schools survived in many areas. Comprehensive education was incomplete in other important ways as well. There was no national curriculum when comprehensive schools were introduced, and therefore no new comprehensive school curriculum was
devised and adopted uniformly across all schools. In fact, until 1989, with the introduction of the GCSE exam, there was not even a common single examination for children to take at the end of their compulsory schooling. Comprehensive schools ran two types of examination, the “O” levels for the most able, and the Certificate of Secondary Education for the lower achievers. Having two different examinations effectively ensured that each school ran different curricula for different groups of children. Also, the nonselective comprehensive principle has not yet been fully implemented, as streaming and setting is still maintained to a large degree throughout the system.

Prior to the 1960s, the English school system was, as in Germany, divided. During the nineteenth century, due to the lack of state intervention, the school system developed into a patchwork of schools controlled by voluntary bodies such as Anglican Church’s National School Society and the British and Foreign Schools Society allied to the nonconformist churches. When governments began to intervene in education toward the end of the century, they neither proposed to bring all education under the sole control of the state nor to link the different school types together into a coherent system. Secondary education was divided into three distinct types that corresponded closely with the stratification of the middle class and upper class. Apart from the secondary schools, which had their own private preparatory schools feeding into them, there were the elementary schools for the working-class children. Instead of integrating this class-based system of education, governments, advised by various statutory commissions during the last part of nineteenth century, allowed a parallel system to continue, even after the 1870 Forster Act finally created the beginning of a public system of elementary schools under the control of local School Boards. In line with widespread opinion at the time, governments still believed that children from different classes should be educated separately.

The 1902 Balfour Act barely changed this, even though it created the first state secondary schools that were soon to allow a trickle of working-class children access through scholarships. Both the state secondary schools and the old private grammar schools were kept as separate as possible from the elementary schools to discourage the notion that the majority of children could obtain a secondary education. The starting age of pupils to the grammar school was not synchronized with the completion of the elementary school, and the grammar schools adopted a very traditional, classically oriented curriculum that children in the elementary schools had hardly been prepared for in their prior learning. The consequence of this was that the parallel system of education was reinforced, in which an elite minority had secondary education while the majority of working-class children
would receive only an elementary school education. In 1944 a major Act on education was passed in order to provide secondary education for all. However, secondary education for all did not imply that all children would go to the same kind of common school. A rigid, tripartite system of education—with grammar schools, secondary modern schools, and secondary technical schools—was organized after the war and developed in a similarly class-divided manner as the mid-nineteenth-century school system had emerged. The selection to secondary education was done on the basis of attainment tests and intelligence tests—the 11-Plus—which were believed to measure a given quota of intelligence that each child had inherited from birth and which would remain constant throughout life.

Only during the 1960s did a growing demand for egalitarian education emerge. In 1965, it was thus made possible for the local authorities to submit plans for the reorganization of secondary education on comprehensive lines. No just a single model but rather several models of comprehensive organization were adopted, even though the favored model became the all-through 11–18 comprehensive school that had already been pioneered in London and elsewhere. The implementation of comprehensive education during the following years was a somewhat uneven process due to a range of patterns that were present and considered acceptable as comprehensive education. Even though an increasing number of pupils became enrolled in comprehensive schools (70 percent in 1975), the comprehensive education system as such resembled a patchwork of uneven types of organizations. Since 1979, comprehensive schooling has no longer been the key for the reorganization of education in Britain. Neoliberal policies are eroding comprehensive education by promoting a greater diversity of school types and by allowing greater use of selection, streaming, and setting.

A Note on Method

Against this background of diverse paths of development, this book attempts to explain why the Scandinavian countries succeeded in introducing radical forms of comprehensive education—with their mixed-ability classes and all-through systems of education from grades 1 to 9/10—whilst comprehensive education failed completely in Germany and was only partially introduced in England. This major question will be explored by employing the so-called macro-causal comparative method (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Ragin, 1987; Skocpol and Somers, 1980; Braembushe, 1989). This method originated in the field of comparative historical sociology: the field in which the most advanced discussions
ever on comparative method have taken place. The method has also been widely used outside the field of historical sociology, for instance, in comparative sociology and comparative political science, but to a much lesser extent in education. The aim of the macro-causal method is to develop causal explanations of large-scale societal outcomes through systematic comparative analysis that tests theories or hypotheses on a set of juxtaposed empirical cases.

The method has its roots in John Stuart Mill’s thoughts on experimental inquiry first set out in *A System of Logic* (1834). Here he described the “method of agreement,” the “method of difference,” and the “indirect method,” each of which utilizes a different comparative logic. The method of agreement involves identifying cases that share in common the outcome that is to be explained (positive cases). If, argued Mill, some instances of an outcome under investigation share in common only one of several possible causal circumstances, then the circumstance in which all the instances are in concordance is the cause of the outcome. An application of this method would, therefore, be to identify common instances of a historical outcome of a set of positive cases and then proceed to determine which circumstances invariably precede its emergence. The circumstance that satisfies this requirement can thus be regarded as the cause. Furthermore, this method can be applied jointly with the so-called indirect method of difference, which is a double application of the method of agreement. This method simultaneously identifies the common outcome and the circumstances in a set of positive cases and the absence of both in a set of contrasting cases (negative cases). The aim of this method is to use the negative cases to reinforce causal explanations drawn from the positive cases.

As Mill himself was aware, neither method can be applied in its pure form to historical cases, where it is not possible to perform perfectly controlled comparisons as in the experimental sciences, or statistical manipulation of variables as in statistical analysis. Major societal phenomena cannot be easily broken apart into analytically separate variables that can be manipulated as in the natural sciences, because these are tightly interwoven with each other in a given historical context that cannot now be changed through experiment. All we can do in qualitative comparative analysis is to select the cases in a way that approximates to an experiment. This problem is not unknown to historical sociologists who are aware that the use of the methods in this way dilutes their efficacy. However, one reason they are in extensive use anyway is that they have, according to Skocpol and Somers (1980), the considerable “virtue of being the only way to attempt to validate and invalidate causal hypotheses about macro-phenomena” (194).
In this study these two methods will only be used as rough guidelines in order to accommodate at least some of the most apparent limitations by dealing with just a small set of interrelated causal circumstances whilst maintaining a few cases as contextualized, historical entities. The Scandinavian countries are constituted as the positive cases, as they share a common outcome—the radical comprehensive school system. Even though the countries differ from each other, as their school systems have indeed absorbed different national “colourings,” they have, nevertheless, developed their systems through strikingly similar paths as outlined above. The next step is to identify causal circumstances—in this context implied as conjunctions of events—that are constant across the positive cases and thereby contribute to the explanation of the common outcome. The outcome is, in other words, analyzed as a result of particular interrelations of circumstances. This is no doubt a tall order since the circumstances are numerous—there is rarely just a single cause—and can be combined in a variety of ways to produce a given outcome. Especially when an outcome results from several different interrelated circumstances, it is not always easy to unravel the decisive causal combinations. But because it is, as Charles C. Ragin (1987) states, the combined effect of various circumstances, their intersection in time and space, that produces a certain outcome, this problem is not solved by abandoning this type of research altogether but through seeking to overcome it to the extent it is possible (27).

The very similar outcomes achieved in comprehensive schooling in the Scandinavian countries demand that we search for a set of interrelated common causes that may have had a decisive effect on these outcomes. The fact that the Scandinavian countries share many distinctive factors in common, which are absent in the negative cases, should make it easier to isolate relevant causes. However, it is clearly not possible to investigate fully all potentially relevant factors, since this will place the analysis out of control. So it has been necessary to proceed by elimination to identify only a smaller number of factors that may be relevant to the explanation. So, for instance, factors that are not present in some form in all the positive cases have been eliminated. Here, nationally oriented assumptions or explanations of comprehensive education have certainly aided the process of elimination. For example, some Danish historians argue that it was the diffusion of the national romantic ideas of the nineteenth-century Danish priest and philosopher N. F. S. Grundtvig that led to comprehensive education in Denmark, but this theory was rejected as a comparative explanation since his ideas did not have any substantive impact on comprehensive education in Norway and Sweden.

In the end, having eliminated factors that are not shared by the positive cases, a number of key factors, common to the Scandinavian countries,
have been identified, which relate to four key issues. These are: (1) the type of state formation undergone in the nineteenth century; (2) the nature of class structure that evolved in the nineteenth century; (3) the nature of liberal politics and of the alliances forged between Liberals and other parties; and (4) the nature of social democracy and its political alliances. Hypotheses relating to each of these phenomena are then developed and tested on each of the countries successively. Where they are found to be common to the positive cases and absent from the negative cases, we have grounds for arguing that they are causally related to the outcome we are investigating.

It should be noted here that the reason it is hypotheses, not theories, which are tested on the historical data is that scholars of the history of education have not been engaged extensively in the development of comparative theories relating to the development of comprehensive education. Most studies of comprehensive education have been single-country studies shaped as historical detailed narratives with a tendency to overemphasize particular causes reserved to one country. Even though these studies have provided us with important detailed accounts, they are nevertheless so deeply entrenched in national history that generalization beyond the particular is almost impossible. To develop a theory of why the Scandinavian countries have introduced extensive comprehensive education, one simply requires to search beyond the particular for a single set of causal circumstances that determines this common outcome.

Skocpol and Somers (1980) have stressed that it is often possible to demonstrate, using the comparative macro-causal method, that widely accepted explanations, usually derived from single national cases, simply cannot account for variations across time and place (194). On the other hand, the fact that the macro-causal method can do this makes it particularly powerful. One example to illustrate this point is the widely held belief that comprehensive education in Sweden was caused solely by powerful Social Democratic governments during the post–Second World War era. This is far from being untrue; however, it is a partial explanation and fails to take into account that the first step toward comprehensive education in all of the Scandinavian countries was taken by liberal parties long before social democracy even gained a political foothold.

Even though the similarity between the countries is the key to developing a theory of comprehensive education in Scandinavia, it does not imply that vital contrasts between the countries are ignored; on the contrary, these are in particular helpful in explaining the different timings of the introduction of comprehensive education. As already mentioned above, comprehensive education was introduced earlier in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark, which can only be explained by national peculiarities.