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Policies in special education support issues in Swedish compulsory school: a nationally representative study of head teachers' judgements

Joanna Giota* and Ingemar Emanuelsson

University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

The general aim of the present study was to explore how head teachers (N = 683) for older students and head teachers (N = 250) for younger students in Swedish compulsory schools describe handling procedures of special education issues in their schools. Two questionnaire surveys on such issues were conducted during the spring term of 2008 among head teachers in a nationally representative sample of schools. Questionnaire answers from the head teachers show that even though the most common type of special support measure is that students are supported by special education teachers in regular classes/groups, the overall picture that emerges is that the 'old traditional ways' in special education support giving are still the most common. Social background and context as well as schoolwork content and teaching habits are judged as key factors behind the students' difficulties and need for special education support. In general, however, school problems and students' difficulties seem still to mainly be seen as caused by student characteristics and disabilities rather than as shortcomings of school and teaching. Differences in head teacher answer profiles could be identified. Such school profiles are also discussed as part of further study planned, where they will be compared to individual data on school experience, and learning data, which are available from the same schools as the head teachers approached.

Keywords: special education policies; support strategies; inclusion–exclusion; resource allocation; head teachers' judgements

Introduction

Reasons for academic difficulties and failures in school are often explained as the shortcomings of individual children. Most often they are expressed in diagnostic and/or disability labels, which are understood as individual-bound characteristics. This is well established as common policy reasoning as well as in a majority of research studies (Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001). Any shortcoming of the school, or in the ways school meets and handles individual needs of special education support – or a combination of the two – are used to a much lesser extent than individual difficulties as explanatory factors (Ainscow 1998).

In a longitudinal and nationally representative study of youngsters born in the 1960s, who left upper secondary school before completing all the school grades, Murray (1997) showed that these students' 'history of poor performance began long before they actually left school' (13). The foundations for academic failure at this level were in fact laid much earlier in school; in many cases, during the initial years at compulsory school. This study was part of an extensive Swedish research program called 'Evaluation through Follow up' (see Emanuelsson 1979; Härnqvist 2000; see also Giota 2006; henceforth abbreviated as the ETF-project). Other

*Corresponding author. Email: joanna.giota@ped.gu.se

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studies within the ETF-project show similar results (Emanuelsson 2003; Emanuelsson and Persson 2002; Svensson and Stahl 1996).

However, in order to prevent academic failure for 'vulnerable' young people, and in the long run to avoid social exclusion and marginalisation in the labour market (as stressed in National – Regeringsproposition 1999/2000 – and EU-policy documents – Commission of the European Communities 2005, 206), one has to understand upcoming student difficulties in broader and also more inclusive perspectives. A more inclusive approach to the teaching of all children in compulsory school is a recommended key educational policy in Sweden (Skolverket 2005), ensuring that all students stay in education (or training) until the age of 19.

An important research issue is, accordingly, to continuously and in long-term perspectives study situations and conditions for students with different kinds of needs of special education support. This ought to be analysed at various levels of the education system. For example, by following students through compulsory school within the ETF-project, Giota, Lundborg and Emanuelsson (2009) could show that support given within the frame of inclusive education patterns tended to be favourable for successful learning and participation in school. On the other side, more exclusive kinds of given special education support – and especially so for longer periods of time – was related to special need students' academic long-term failures.

The notion that disability and academic failures are outcomes of interaction processes between individual characteristics and environmental circumstances (Ainscow 1998) are to be understood as basic theory preconditions, and that is the case also in the study reported here. In this study, which is conducted within the ongoing project 'Special education in comprehensive schools: Extent, forms and effects' (henceforth abbreviated as the STOFF-project), head teachers' ways of understanding and handling special education support issues in Swedish primary and upper secondary schools are explored. As well as many of the earlier studies mentioned above, this study is part of the ETF-project. Specifically, what is reported here is the first part of a series of studies, dealing with a questionnaire sent to head teachers in all schools with students included in two of the ETF-project's nine cohort samples (students born in 1992 and 1998, respectively).

The main aim of the STOFF-project is to search for relationships between school policy profiles, expressed in answers from head teachers, and individual students' successes or failures in the same schools. The main aim of the present study is, thus, to search for possibilities to identify differences in school special education policies in a way that could be interpreted as 'school policy profiles'. These profiles will, then, be used for studies of consequences for individual students in different kinds of difficulties and their need of support in different policy profile schools. In the present study, the search for such 'school policy profiles' will take place within four main themes concerning differentiation; allocation of resources; reasons for identifying students as in need of special education support; and structural factors for given special education support to be effective.

Disability policies, special needs education and research

Today the majority of students in need of special education support, with or without a medical diagnosis, attend regular schools in Sweden. According to the current Education Act 1985, separating students in difficulties and/or with disabilities into special classes should be exceptional. This inclusive ambition of special education support policy is based on a perspective of 'one school for all' and decisions taken on democratic ideals about rights to full participation for all students in regular school classes as well as in society as a whole (see Asp Onsjö 2006; Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Dyson 2005; Haug 1999; Riddell 2002; Skidmore 2004). Such an inclusive ambition seems, however, to have been difficult to accomplish, and it has continuously

been both discussed and questioned (Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001; Nilholm 2006; Persson 2008).

One reason to why inclusive education in the Swedish compulsory education system has been met by 'tendencies of exclusion' is related to an increasing frequency of neuropsychiatric and other medical diagnoses given to students in – or causing – difficulties, especially so since around 1990. An increase of segregated forms of special education support, like special schools and special classes, has been noticed as part of the same pattern as well (Tideman 2000). The same have been reported also as an international phenomenon (Gustafsson and Myrberg 2002).

During the 1990s many parents in Sweden demanded that their children ought to be examined by various experts, such as physicians and psychologists, because such an expert-given diagnosis was thought to increase the chances for the student to receive the support needed from the school. The increased demands for 'objective' assessments and diagnoses that 'confirm' the needs of the students had probably, at least partly, to do with the 1990s financial crisis, which led to cutbacks of resources in the majority of municipalities and also in school budgets (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007). Such cutbacks were often taken from special education support resources (Ekström and Emanuelsson 1998). The fact that changes in the extent of special education and how it is organised are directly related to the actual costs of both regular and special education are well-documented in both Swedish (Ekström and Emanuelsson 1998; Hjörne 2004; Persson 2008) and international studies (see Hanushek and Rivkin 1997; Haug 1999).

According to Haug (1999) two trends have steered the development of special education in Sweden from its introduction and onwards: a desire to achieve equality and, at the same time, a desire to maintain high achievement standards in the regular class. These two trends have often proved to be seen contradictory and today this inherent contradiction still remains.

A study within the framework of the 2003 National Evaluation of the Swedish compulsory school (Skolverket 2006) showed that half of the participating head teachers reported on grouping students according to ability and/or previous achievements. A rough average showed that 60% of the teaching takes place in regular classes, whereas 34% takes place in other constellations, and approximately 6% is being provided on an individual basis. This study showed, in addition, that there are substantial differences between schools in reasons for decisions taken about needs of, as well as composition of, special groups. In another nationwide study of attitudes towards, and motives for, special needs education among head teachers in Swedish comprehensive schools, Tideman et al. (2004) found that students' school problems, including academic failures, seldom were interpreted in terms of organisational and environmental issues. Problems and difficulties were, firstly, attributed to individual student characteristics and were, thus, interpreted as 'individual-bound' rather than education environment related.

From the late 1980s and especially from around the year 2000 important changes to the school system have taken place in Sweden. The increasing possibilities for parents to choose among schools – community ruled or independent schools – other than the one closest to their home has as one consequence: that schools have to compete with each other in recruiting students. They have to prove that they are 'good' schools, which usually means that their students have attained high marks in average. Until very lately, marks were officially not be given before Grade 8 in compulsory school. In the present study, the 'pressure' put on schools to prove their quality in terms of average mark levels is supposed to be of greater influence in the upper grades of compulsory school than in the lower, not least so for special education policies used (Haug 1999; Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001). Therefore, in the present study, we search for whether there tend to be differences in views on special needs education and inclusive policies between two head teacher groups; those responsible for schools with lower grades and those with higher.

Method

Samples and procedures

The present study is part of the ongoing project 'Special education in comprehensive schools: Extent, forms and effects' (henceforth abbreviated as the STOFF-project). STOFF is in itself part of an ongoing profound and long term research program with continuous follow-up studies of sequential every fifth cohort samples of students. This project is called 'Evaluation through follow-up' (henceforth abbreviated as the ETF-project) and was started about 50 years ago (see Emanuelsson 1979; Härnqvist 2000; see also Giota 2006). In close cooperation with Statistics Sweden, ETF has since its inception in 1961 and until now followed up nine nationally representative cohort samples, each comprising about 10,000 students. Alongside administrative data, collected for the ETF-project by Statistics Sweden (starting in Grade 3 and as long as the student are enrolled in compulsory and upper secondary education). For each sample, answers from student questionnaires, results from school examinations and cognitive tests have been gathered, starting in Grade 6. Follow up studies have, then, been conducted in Grade 9 of compulsory school and the third year of upper secondary school.

Part of this collected information is rather comprehensive, individual-based data, on given special educational support and/or partaking in special class/school, etc. However, no information about policies in dealing with special education support issues in the schools where the sampled students belong is collected for the ETF-project. For example, to what extent are policies and practice characterised by the use of more inclusive than exclusive planning and measures, or vice versa? Or what are the dominant ways of sharing responsibilities and duties among school personnel and in working teams?

In order to gather information on such policy issues, Statistics Sweden was commissioned by the STOFF-project to conduct two questionnaire surveys. Two questionnaires with identical questions addressed to two samples of head teachers were, hence, constructed. The questionnaires were then distributed by Statistics Sweden to the head teachers in charge of the compulsory schools in which the students (born in 1992 and 1998, respectively), participating in the ETF-project's data collections, were enrolled at the time of the investigation, which took place in the spring term of 2008. At this point in time, the 'ETF-students' were, more specifically, in Grade 9 and Grade 3 respectively in Swedish compulsory schools. The present study, reported here, is based on information collected in these two investigations in 2008.

Measures

Each head teacher questionnaire consisted of 84 questions with given multiple-choice answers and 17 open-ended questions. Some of the questions are identical, or very similar, to those used in two earlier questionnaire studies in Sweden. In particular, the one by Nilholm et al. (2007), addressed personnel in charge of the compulsory school activities and work dealing with special education support issues in all municipalities in Sweden (N = 290). The other conducted by Persson and Andreasson for the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2003), addressed teachers in charge of special education support issues and action plans in about 20% of all compulsory schools in Sweden. The reason for using identical and/or similar questions in STOFF was to make it possible to compare the results of the present study with those obtained in the earlier ones and, hence, identify changes in patterns of responses over time, as well as to validate the results. Some of the questions were, in addition, formulated in such a way as to contextualise and deepen the questionnaire responses gained from the 'ETF-students' born in 1992 in Grade 9. Questionnaire responses of the same kind from the 'ETF-students' born in 1998 will be collected by Statistics Sweden in 2011, when these students are in Grade 6.

The number of head teachers that, for the cohort of students born in 1992, returned a completed questionnaire was 683, or 83%, whilst the response rate of the head teachers for the 1998 cohort of students was 250, or 83%. Given that the samples of participating schools in the ETF-project's follow up studies are drawn when students are in Grade 3, and that students may move to other places or, for other reasons, change schools during their compulsory education period, there were substantially more schools included from the older cohort (students born in 1992) than the younger. In the latter sample all individual students were still in Grade 3, having, hence, almost no possibilities to change school before the questionnaire study started. Note, however, that the head teacher responses presented here are assumed to encompass *all* students in Grades 7–9 and *all* students in Grades 1–3 in the schools in question, and not only 'ETF-students' or those in need of special education support. This was stressed in the instructions to participating head teachers, given that the general aim of the STOFF-project is to get information about school policies and routines in the search for differences in eventual 'school policy profiles' between schools.

The present study, and what is reported in the result section, is based on data and information from the questionnaires dealt with above. Furthermore, we concentrate on answers to a selection of multiple-choice questions. The responses used refer to four main themes or overarching research questions, investigated also in the earlier questionnaire studies, previously mentioned. These themes address main issues in research on special education in Sweden (Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001) as well as elsewhere. The chosen themes concern differentiation, allocation of resources, reasons for identifying students as in need of special education support, and structural factors for given special education support to be effective.

Analyses

In order to test whether there are differences in views on special education support issues between the two head teacher samples, cross tabulations of the head teacher responses and chi-square tests of independence were used. The results to be presented below are, hence, all statistically significant ($p< 0.05$ or $p<0.01$), if nothing else is noticed. All comparisons are based on weighted data. This gives possibilities for making inferences from the two head teacher samples to the total population of head teachers in charge of the Swedish compulsory school stages in question (Grades 1–3 and 7–9, respectively). The weights were estimated by Statistics Sweden according to standard procedures used in earlier studies within the ETF-project. In short, the weights are based partly on the design used for drawing the two samples of head teachers and partly on the amounts of missing questionnaire responses from each head teacher sample.

In each data collection, Statistics Sweden has followed the ethical rules of the Swedish Research Council specifying, among other things, that all participation is voluntary and that participants can withdraw from the different research studies without giving any explanation. Moreover, the individual identification codes of the participants are available only to personnel at Statistics Sweden. Researchers with access to the collected data are, accordingly, working with data files without individual identification codes. All data collected for the STOFF and ETF projects are stored on a dedicated server, which is operated by the Data Service organisation at the Faculty of Education, Gothenburg University. Authorisation for keeping these data has been obtained with the license granted to Gothenburg University.

Results

Differentiation

Reasons for discussing class/group composition

According to 66% of the head teachers for students in Grades 7–9 conflicts in class were the most common reason why issues relating to class/group composition were discussed in their

school. Differences in students' attainments in specific school subjects was the second reason (53% of the head teachers said so). The reason that was the least common in initiating such discussions was differences related to different residential conditions in the schools' catchments areas (11%). Conflicts in class was a common marked reason for this kind of discussion, even among the head teachers for students in Grades 1–3 (61% of these head teachers said so). In these grades, the composition of classes/groups was less often an issue for discussion in relation to the students' attainment in specific subjects (41%).

Persons exerting influence upon class/group composition

Regarding influence upon the ways in which classes/groups are composed in their schools, the head teachers' responses show that, for the older students, it is the teachers/special education teachers who are said to have the greatest influence (92% of the head teachers said so). Although parents are provided with opportunities to exert influence on issues of class/group composition, the relative influence of both parents (43%) and students (40%) was regarded as limited. The impact of the teachers/special education teachers on this issue is weaker in the early years of compulsory education (86% of the head teachers said so). Both parents (32%) and in particular students (18%) are also said by the head teachers to have much more limited opportunities to exert influence on this issue.

Organisational differentiation

In the questionnaire the head teachers were asked about whether students in their school were divided into classes/groups on the basis of previously acquired knowledge or measured attainment. Three out of four head teachers for students in Grades 7–9 answer that such divisions occur very infrequently in their schools, whilst the remaining state the opposite. A quarter of all head teachers report that dividing students in such a way is common practice in their schools. A similar pattern of responses emerges among head teachers for students in Grades 1–3 as well (79% and 21%, respectively).

Organisation of special education support measures

Head teachers' responses to questions about how special education support to students in need of such measures is organised and offered in their schools are displayed in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, head teachers' responses to this question vary considerably between higher and lower school grades. According to 82% of the head teachers for the older students, the most common kind of special education support measure is that students are supported by a special education teacher in their regular class/group, followed by that they are instructed both in their regular class and in special instruction groups (68%). It is relatively unusual that a class is reorganised as a result of that certain students need special education support, or that students are placed in a special school/group on either a temporary or permanent basis. The same pattern is reported also from schools for the younger students. From the head teachers' responses, it appears, hence, that inclusive solutions are more commonly practised in early years of compulsory school than in higher grades.

Allocation of resources

In two open-ended questions, the head teachers were asked to estimate the proportion of students in their schools who ARE in need of special education support measures, as well as the proportion of students who actually RECEIVE such support. The analyses show that in

Table 1. Special education support measures. Proportions (per cent) of answers given row wise and for lower and higher grades, respectively.

	VC		RC		RUnc		VUnc	
	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3
Students are instructed in special instruction classes/groups	8	3	19	16	39	30	34	52
Students are instructed both in their regular class and in special instruction groups	20	17	48	38	23	26	9	20
Student are in their ordinary class/ group and receives support by a special education teacher	33	50	49	42	13	6	5	2
The class is reorganised (e.g., adjustment of the class size)	3	3	9	14	41	41	47	42
Students are placed in a special school/group on a temporary or permanent basis	6	0	2	1	14	11	83	89
Extra teaching resource in the classroom	6	10	31	37	43	39	20	14
Access to a student assistant in the classroom	4	6	26	26	37	45	33	23
Students have adjusted study programmes	4	1	25	13	52	31	19	55

Note: VC = very common; RC = rather common; RUnc = Rather uncommon; VUnc = very uncommon

Grades 7–9 the estimated proportion of students who *receive* special education support (M = 17.1; Sd = 10.7) was somewhat lower than the proportion regarded as *being* in need of such support (M = 19.2; Sd = 10.7).

In an in-depth analysis, the schools in the two surveys have been grouped on the basis of the proportion of students estimated by their head teacher as being in need of special education support, and on the proportion who actually receive such support, respectively. Among head teachers for students in Grades 7–9, two out of three (69%) estimate that up to 20% of the students in their schools *are* in need of special education support. At the same time, 75% of the head teachers for these school grades estimate that up to 20% of the students in their school actually *receive* special education support. Consequently, in *two thirds of the 7–9 grade schools*, one fifth of all students is regarded as being in need of special education support *and* appears to receive the support that they need.

At the same time, every fourth head teacher (26%) reports that more than 20% of the students in their schools are in need of special education support, while only one out of five of the schools (21%), according to head teacher estimates, actually provide special education support to more than this proportion of students. These estimates can, in other words, be interpreted as that *one fourth of the 7–9 grade schools* do not allocate sufficient resources to provide special education support to those students who are considered as being in need of such support.

A similar pattern is repeated for the younger students. Again the estimated proportion of students who *receive* special education support (M = 16.5; Sd = 11.7) is lower than the proportion regarded as *being* in need of such support (M = 18.6; Sd = 13.3). And also here the estimates of the needs of special education support are, in one fourth of all 1–3 grade schools, in excess

of the number of students who actually receive such support. Here, every fourth head teacher estimate that more than 20% of the students are in need of support, while only one out of five actually provides support according to the estimated proportion of students in need of that.

Reasons for identifying students as in need of special education support

Individual- and context-dependent reasons

As can be seen in Table 2, the most common reasons for identifying a student in Grades 7–9 as in need of special education support are, according to practically all head teachers, individual-related. In short, it is the student's individual characteristics – capabilities and/or disabilities – that are regarded as the main reasons necessitating special education support. This can be compared with the next most common reason that 'the curriculum goals are too difficult for certain students', which is the response given by four out of five head teachers for these school grades. The response alternatives – 'deficiencies in teachers' competence' or 'certain classes don't function well' – are marked out by nine out of ten head teachers as being rather uncommon reasons to special education support needs. At the same time, one third of all the head teachers for these school grades cite that 'the teaching is poorly adapted to students' different capabilities' as a common reason for the need of special education support. For the younger students, the picture that emerges is somewhat different, especially with regard to the question of deficiencies in the students' home environment. The head teachers for students in Grades 1–3 cite, in addition, more often poor teaching as a reason for students' needs of special education support.

Medical reasons

To use a medical diagnosis in identifying students as in need of special education support is rather common. The questionnaire answers show that a medical diagnosis has, according to 70% of the head teachers for the older students and 69% for the younger, substantial or fairly substantial importance for the identification of a student's special education needs, and for the allocation of special education support as well. Only a small minority of head teachers (5% and 1%, respectively) are of the opinion that a medical diagnosis lacks importance with regard to

Table 2. Reasons for identifying students as in need of special education support. Proportions (per cent) of answers given row wise and for lower and higher grades, respectively.

	V C		R C		R Unc		V Unc	
	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3	grades 7–9	1–3
The curriculum goals are too difficult for certain students	41	47	39	35	15	12	5	7
The student's own special needs	62	70	37	29	1	1	0	0
Deficiencies in the students' home environment	11	6	40	30	40	53	9	11
Deficiencies in the teachers' competence	1	2	8	7	54	45	37	46
Certain classes don't function well	1	2	11	12	59	55	29	32
The teaching is poorly adapted to the students' different capabilities	3	2	32	17	46	52	19	29

Note: VC = very common; RC = rather common; RUnc = Rather uncommon; VUnc = very uncommon.

issues of identifying special education needs and providing support. The differences between head teachers for older and younger students are not significant.

Structural factors for given special education support to be effective

The head teachers were asked to assess the importance of a range of different factors for the special education support provided to be effective. Teachers' competence was estimated as the most important factor by all of the head teachers for the older students (99%). Of equally great importance (96–98%) was access to special education competence, a well-functioning working team, and the ability to use a range of different teaching forms, whilst the importance of access to assistants/resource staff was assessed somewhat lower (68%). The head teachers for the younger students responded in a similar manner.

In another question the head teachers were asked to assess the collective teaching competence in their schools for providing special education support to students in different kinds of difficulties. A majority of head teachers for the older students state that such competence is quite good or very good. The best competence, in their opinion, relates to students who have literacy difficulties (e.g., dyslexia) (94%) or general learning difficulties (90%). The competence to teach students with difficulties in mathematics (e.g., dyscalculia) (80%) is also assessed as good. Competence is also assessed as being good in the case of students who have concentration difficulties (86%), socio-emotional difficulties (83%) or ADHD/DAMP (81%). On the other hand, available competence is assessed satisfactory to a lesser extent when it comes to students with functional disabilities (59%) and sight (47%) or hearing (59%) impairments – that is, just the case in one half of the schools.

The head teachers for the younger students say more often that their schools' competence to support students with general learning difficulties, socio-emotional difficulties and ADHD/DAMP is sufficient.

Summary of main findings

The general aim of the present study was to explore how head teachers for older and younger students respectively handle special education issues in their schools. One main finding of the study is that a common policy in meeting natural student variation of preconditions and abilities, among head teachers, is to group students with streaming, and to find special solutions for meeting students' individual-bound needs. To teach certain students outside the regular class seems rather commonly to be accepted, and, according to the head teachers' questionnaire responses, also legitimised, when it concerns students with various school-related difficulties. The findings show that one quarter of the head teachers for Grades 7–9 practice such streaming or organisational differentiation and, although to a somewhat less frequency in Grades 1–3, the findings show that it is commonly practised even in that early student ages. Moreover, 27% of the head teachers for older students and 19% for the younger state that instructing students in need of special education support in special instruction groups is very common or rather common in their school. The picture that emerges when putting these proportions together is that streaming or organisational differentiation is practised in more than every second school for older students (52%) and every third for younger (39%).

Practically all head teachers for students in Grade 7–9 attribute the reasons for a student's problems and difficulties in school and her/his need of special education support predominantly to the student's own shortcomings and individual characteristics. The reasons for a student's need of support is, in that sense, seen as individual-bound instead of being understood as teaching and treatment dependant and/or related. The head teachers for students in the earlier grades

cite, on the other hand, more often that teaching is not sufficiently adapted to students' various capabilities as a common reason for a student's difficulties and, accordingly, need of special education support.

Another main finding of the study is the high importance given by head teachers to medical diagnosis for the identification and allocation of special education support for older as well as younger students.

Moreover, one fourth of the 7–9 grade schools do not allocate sufficient resources to provide special education support to all those students who are considered as being in need of such support. A similar pattern is seen for the younger students. When the head teachers were asked to assess the importance of a range of different factors for the special education support to be effective, the findings show that available teacher competence was estimated as the most important factor by all of the head teachers.

Discussion

Curricular recommendations say that streaming or organisational differentiation is to be avoided but, at the same time, it is not totally forbidden pratice in the Swedish education system. According to Emanuelsson (2001), while placements in special education classes/groups most often is said to be done with the students' best interests in mind, in fact, such separation actually seems to be undertaken for the sake of the teachers and/or the class as a whole as well. Findings from over 40 years of studies in Sweden show that, in general, it is not possible for students in schoolwork difficulties, both to make up for gaps in knowledge and advance to the level of her/his classmates with the help of special education support. Especially if this support is given in more or less separated classes/groups (Giota, Lundborg, and Emanuelsson 2009; Emanuelsson 1974; Emanuelsson, Persson, and Rosenqvist 2001; Persson 1998a; Stangvik 1979; Österling 1967). Students, who receive special education support in that way at an early stage in school, despite all best intentions, often find that their special needs become permanent. Their education career, therefore, often tends to be a special one alongside, but not equal to, their former classmates' in the regular classes. The findings of the present study are, thus, in line with those from earlier studies in Sweden (see Persson 2008; Skolverket 2006). Increasing international evidence show, as well, that many children in need of special educational support, for different reasons, do not receive equal opportunities for learning and, therefore, run the risk to become marginalised (Booth and Ainscow 1998).

The findings from our study show that it is common practise to use medical and other diagnoses for the identification of students with special needs. This is also in accordance with findings from most of the other studies as well, where there are increasing demands for assessments and diagnoses that confirm the needs of the students in Swedish schools. Partly, this trend probably has to do with budget reductions, such as those that were made in Swedish schools during the 1990s and still are taking place. Schools may use such diagnoses as a precondition for allocating extra special resources as support for students in need (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007). At the same time, according to our findings, it is relatively common, both in 7–9 and 1–3 grade schools, not to allocate sufficient resources to provide special education support to all identified students in need of such support. The proportions identified in our study in this matter are almost identical with the ones identified in the two earlier questionnaire studies in Sweden (Nilholm et al. 2007; Skolverket 2003).

Budget reductions may, in addition, explain the increasing number of students with special education needs during the 1990s and later on (see Giota, Lundborg, and Emanuelsson 2009; Tideman 1998) and their placement in special schools for students with learning disabilities (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007). Parents may choose to place their child in such

schools in order to gain secure access to needed special education teaching resources. As noted already, the results of the present study show parents of both older and younger students to have limited opportunities to exert influence upon the ways in which classes are composed in school, or on how students are divided in groups, and, thus, the kind of special education support that they may need and get. This is in line with findings obtained by Persson and Andeasson (Skolverket 2003) in their study comprising about 20% of all compulsory schools in Sweden.

However, taken together, from the results showing increasing demands for assessments and diagnoses, we may conclude that they indicate a development pattern of increasing segregation of students in need of special education support, rather than of inclusive education within the mainstream education system. This is a sign on, and means, then, that more or less segregated solutions can be seen as an indication of that the special education's psycho-medical legacy (Skidmore 2004), or at least the individual-bound perspective, may still be relevant in Swedish compulsory school (Emanuelsson et al. op cit; Haug 1999; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007).

The findings of the present study may also be a sign on head teachers for the higher grades in Swedish compulsory school still operating according to a more 'traditional' conception of curriculum in mind, rather than the new curriculum (Lpo 94). As noted already, practically all head teachers for the higher grades attribute the reasons for a student's need of special education support predominantly to the student's own shortcomings and individual characteristics. According to Clough (2000) 'the traditional' conception of curriculum was inspired by a psycho–medical paradigm, advocating 'treatment' and students' 'rehabilitation' to suit curricula goals (see also Haug op cit). The practice of the head teachers for the earlier grades is, on the other hand, more in line with curriculum based measures or interventions aiming at more inclusive aims (Clough 2000). Specifically, the new curriculum (Lpo 94) in Sweden is directed towards the planning for the students, for purposes of its use in inclusive education in mainstream compulsory schools (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergstrom 2007).

A challenging question that emerges here is whether school should try to adjust the curriculum goals to meet the student's needs, or 'adjust the needs' of the student to suit the given curricula and established ways of teaching demands. This is an example of a dilemma that for many years have been discussed in practise as well as in special education research as a kind of paradigmatic challenge (Haug 1998; Emanuelsson et al. op cit).

Future research

Persson (1998b) has shown that the proportion of students in different schools receiving special education support is strikingly similar, irrespective of the fact that schools and their student intake differ substantially from one to another in most relevant aspects. According to Emanuelsson and Persson (1997), this result can be seen as an indication that schools tend to create a need to discern a proportion of students to be regarded as having 'special' needs . The latter is in fact a real – but often not clearly expressed – motive for special needs identification and support allocation, and especially so for the more 'segregated' forms of support giving.

The analyses of the head teachers' responses presented in this study show, however, that in spite of the common pattern, there are some interesting response pattern differences in many question areas. This means that it could be possible to identify different kinds of school policy profiles in dealing with special education issues from the reported and so far analysed head teacher responses. For example, there are different norms, values and shared beliefs, or school cultures, in relation to inclusive education as an aim and practise, which can be used as characteristics of such policy profiles.

To identify and analyse such school cultures in relation to information from individual students is one of the aims for future analyses. A main focus in these analyses will be to examine

if and in what sense such school cultures may make a difference for students' possibilities to acquire positive experiences from school, feelings of motivation, self-confidence in learning, and success in academic work (cf. Giota 2001; Lumby and Morrison 2009). Most interesting are these questions in relation to children and youngsters judged to be in need of special education support.

In order to get a better understanding of how polices and practices are carried out in this field, there is a need for further study. In particular, studies that link school structure and organisation policies with regard to inclusion or segregation of students with special educational needs in long-term perspectives are needed. Such studies are planned and are partly in progress within the STOFF-project.

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Notes on contributors

Joanna Giota is associate professor in Education at University of Gothenburg. In her research she has, among other things, focused on consequences of different motivational orientations toward school and learning, and self-beliefs, on achievement over time and students' educational carriers. Most of her studies are longitudinal based and nationally representative.

Ingemar Emanuelsson is professor em. in Special Education at University of Gothenburg. In his research he has for a long time focused on consequences of different ways of giving special educational support in schools; often related to issues connected to inclusion–exclusion dilemmas. Most of his studies are longitudinal based and nationally representative.

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