Additional support for pupils with reading difficulties – a case study

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ABSTRACT

The importance of reading competence has been increasingly acknowledged in the Swedish educational system, not least through the demands for higher standards in reading in all subjects stated in the national curriculum. Still, in the school year 2018/19, approximately 7% of all Swedish pupils did not achieve the learning goals related to reading competence stated for the subject Swedish in the national curriculum for compulsory school (grades 0–9) (Skolverket, 2018).

In order to identify and support pupils with reading difficulties as early as possible, compulsory reading development assessments are conducted in grades 1, 3, 6 and 9 according to which all pupils displaying a delayed development are to receive additional support. The provision of this support is the responsibility of every municipality, but in what form and to what extent and duration it should be given is not prescribed.

The present study aims to give insight into how Swedish policy reforms to improve reading ability among pupils in compulsory school are operationalised in one Swedish municipality during the school year 2018/2019. Further, the study seeks to exemplify how the policy guidelines are implemented at three schools and how policy and practice are related.

Introduction

Learning to read is a highly complex process. It requires the identification of individual words, the activation of their contextual meaning, the understanding of causal relations within and between sentences and the integration of background knowledge to finally make inferences and “read between the lines” (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). Pupils need to “understand, use, reflect and engage in texts to achieve their own goals, develop their skills and their potential to participate in society” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 18, authors’ own translation).

According to the influential model Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Tunmer & Greaney, 2010), successful reading is dependent on two components: visual word recognition, i.e. the fluent decoding of letters in words to corresponding sounds, and language comprehension. Both components are independent of each other, but
equally necessary for successful reading. If pupils display deficiencies in one or both components, reading comprehension difficulties are most likely to appear. While many pupils experience the process of learning to read as almost effortless, others struggle for many years until they have developed automaticity in reading. Some never reach a level of reading comprehension competence which is sufficient to meet the learning goals stated in national curricula.

Sweden has been facing a continuous decline in reading proficiency in relation to other countries’ performance in regular international pupil assessments in 4th and 9th grade in the first decade of the 2000’s (see Skolverket, 2013 for an evaluation of PISA 2006–2012, 2012 for an evaluation of PIRLS 2001–2011). Even though this trend was reversed to some extent after 2012, the overall proportion of the least competent readers has not changed (PIRLS 2016) or even increased (PISA 2018) (Skolverket, 2017, 2019) since these international surveys began in the early 2000’s. According to statistics by Skolverket,2 14.4% of pupils who left compulsory school in school year 2019/20 lacked the required certificate to continue studying a national programme at upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2020). Potential reasons for this are deficiencies in reading competence and lack of sufficient reading support. The Swedish government has initiated a number of actions and policy reforms in order to counteract this decline, for example the introduction of a new Education act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800), including the obligatory provision of early and systematic additional adjustments and special support for pupils with special needs, for example in reading, writing and mathematics. This paper investigates how these policy reforms targeted to pupils’ reading development are operationalised and implemented at three schools in one Swedish municipality during the school year 2018/19.

**Theoretical perspectives on policy enactment**

Governments undertake reforms in the form of developing new educational policies in order to address the growing needs for individuals in knowledge-based societies. However, it is not always clear whether formulated policies take effect in the real world. A number of scholars have investigated the impact of reforms and the factors contributing to successful policy implementations (see e.g. Bell & Stevenson, 2015; Honig, 2006; Schulte, 2018). In this study we define education policy as decisions and regulations by educational legislators put in place for educational facilities – in this study, schools- to accomplish the education of pupils.

The literature on education policy implementation provides a number of theoretical frameworks for analysing policy enactments. One of the relevant frameworks, proposed by Bell and Stevenson (2015), considers the socio-political environment as the influential factor that “shapes the context within which policy is framed and enacted” (p.148). Their model suggests multidirectional interactions between the development and implementation of a policy. Policy shapes the organisation and operational practices of education, while being affected itself by local dynamics and implementers’ actions. This perspective emphasises that education policy enactment should be understood as the chain of processes through which policies are interpreted, transmitted and recreated rather than a simple process of execution (Bell & Stevenson, 2015). Fullan (2015) introduces another model which links policy implementation to educational change.
According to this model policy implementation means bringing modifications to the educational systems and to schools. The transformation involves changing curriculum materials, pedagogical practices and beliefs about learning processes. This model acknowledges the significant role of teachers and principals in implementing – or not implementing – the policy at their level according to the policy makers’ goals.

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) point to the distinction between the objectives of a policy and the resources allocated for the policy enactment. Policy enactment is a complex and sophisticated process, which can be affected by resource environments such as buildings and infrastructures, staffing profile, leadership experience, and budgetary conditions. In some cases, policies seem to develop without careful reflections on the essential practical mechanisms required for their implementation. Persisting discrepancies between policy and practice are explained by the “loose coupling” between more global policy objectives and more local, contextual conditions (Ramirez, 2012). Likewise, an approach proposed by Malen (2006), views policy implementation as a dynamic process that depends on the alignment of policy premises with actors’ interests. The author stresses the actors’ resources, skills and will to implement influence the outcomes. On the other hand, the institutional and socio-cultural settings shape actors’ interests and strategies. Honig (2006) highlights the role of context and describes policy implementation as a construct of multiple processes, which is the product of the interaction among policies, people and places. Putting policies in practice may differ between schools depending on their culture or ethos as well as necessities situated within the schools’ limitations and possibilities (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). On the other hand, some scholars believe that education policies will not be implemented without teachers’, principals’ and other actors’ willingness to engage and to change practices (Fullan, 2015). Once introduced to new policies, local actors at educational institutions need to transform policies into words and actions that make sense within their own framework. Policy transformation at this level may be selective, with actors picking only the components that are estimated legitimate within and across local contexts (Schulte, 2018).

The main objective of a policy is a design that has the potential to change and to improve a system; however, according to Schulte (2018) some policies are generated with the aim of “pleasing and appeasing certain groups” (p.627). Such policy-making might function for the purpose of “mobilising public opinion and resources to move into the direction of attaining the goals” (Ramirez, 2012, p. 433). That is, such non-committed policy-making serves as a first step in order to simulate more realistic changes. Schulte (2018) discusses the indicators for policy simulation, like for instance no or limited resources allocated to the policy, lack or mismatch of implementing agencies, and absence of clearly defined objectives and criteria of success. Such situations might show as Phillips and Ochs (2003, p. 459) put it, “time lag or delay” between policy decision and enactment. The assumption is that implementation has occurred only partially; however, with sufficient time and patience incremental changes will be generated.

This study examines the enactment of the additional reading support policy in a Swedish municipality with reference to the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks.
These frameworks present different factors and dimensions that can play a role in policy enactment, such as: socio-political environment, actors’ interests, resources environments, and institutional and socio-cultural settings. In this way, these frameworks complement each other and give us a broad theoretical framework to base the analysis and discussion of the results on.

**Efforts to increase reading competences**

Efforts have been undertaken by the Swedish National Agency for Education to improve Swedish pupils’ reading proficiency. One example is Läslyftet (2015–2020), an in-service training programme aimed at developing compulsory school teachers’ competences in teaching language, reading and writing in Swedish and later in all other subjects, too.

Further, an increased focus has been directed towards early identification of reading and writing difficulties and additional reading support mechanisms in pre-school class and early school years (grades 0–3). Following the results of an evaluation undertaken by Skolinspektionen in 2016, which revealed that additional reading support is frequently offered too late and inappropriate in relation to pupils’ individual difficulties, a change in the Education Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800, ch. 3, 4–6§) was implemented in 2019. According to the so-called “Läsa, skriva, räkna – en garanti för tidiga stödinsatser”, young pupils in need of additional support are to receive appropriate support based on their individual needs early as possible. The aim is to increase the number of pupils meeting the goals for reading comprehension at the end of grade 1 and for Swedish at the end of grade 3. In a long-term perspective, this change is aimed to increase the chances for all pupils to complete compulsory education in grade 9.

In order to assure that appropriate support is implemented without delay, a tight system of screening and assessments has been established. Teachers in compulsory school are obliged to carry out six obligatory assessment procedures between grade 0 and grade 9 (“Hitta språket” in grade 0, “Bedömningsstöd” twice in grade 1, national assessment in grade 3, 6 and 9). Connected to the national assessments there is a number of knowledge and skill requirements stated, referring to both reading fluency and reading comprehension, which teachers evaluate in their continuous formative assessments of pupils’ skills and competences throughout compulsory school. Municipalities can decide about further screenings throughout compulsory education.

**Additional adjustments and special support**

If a pupil at any age is found to be at risk of not fulfilling the knowledge and skill requirements, the Swedish Education Act states that either additional adjustments are to be made or special support is to be given (Skollag, 2010, p. 800, ch. 3§, 5§ & 6§). Adequate additional adjustments and special support are to be introduced promptly and it is the teachers’ responsibility to observe, whether a pupil might need such adjustments, to investigate what the causes of the learning difficulties are, to identify changes required in the learning environment and to implement these (Skolverket, 2014). This not only requires teachers’ competence in identifying difficulties and knowledge about suitable measures, but also concerns the
organisation of additional reading support. Such measures are to take departure from each individual’s specific needs (Skolverket, 2014) and may include changes in the classroom setting or teaching, additional instructions, pictures and visuals, additional training in reading, writing or mathematics, access to digital aids or additional reading support provided by a special needs teacher.4

One potential additional adjustment recommended by the National Agency for Education are so-called intensive reading periods (Skolverket, 2014, p. 26). They refer to intensified reading instruction during a duration of several weeks in daily out-of-class sessions, provided by the class teacher or a special needs teacher. The concept of intensive reading periods can be located within a categorical view on pupils’ learning difficulties, which in simplified terms, focuses on the pupil having difficulties, rather than the difficulties originating in the pupil’s educational setting or learning environment. Consequently, actions are to focus on the individual pupil through individual intensive training (Nilholm, 2007). Applying such a categorical perspective as a means to support pupils is not unproblematic and has been discussed in relation to issues of inclusion and participation (Bruce, Ivarsson, Svensson, & Sventelius, 2016; Persson, 2003). However, the intention of intensive reading periods is providing occasional intensified support, supposed to enable the student to catch up with classmates and to re-integrate into ordinary lessons as soon as possible. Convincing evidence from research argues that intensified reading support is beneficial for developing poor readers’ reading skills (Bowyer-Crane, Snowling, Duff, & Hulme, 2011; Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2020; Elbro, Dalby, & Maarbjerg, 2011; Elleman, 2017; Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, & Compton, 2009; Gustafson, Fälth, Svensson, Tjus, & Heimann, 2011; McArthur et al., 2018; Wanzek et al., 2018; Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Its success is associated with daily, systematic and individualised instruction during a short period of time (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Høien & Lundberg, 2013; Torgesen et al., 2001; Wanzek et al., 2018; Wolff, 2011).

The Swedish National Agency for Education does not prescribe how additional reading support and/or intensive reading periods are to be carried out at schools. Instead it is the responsibility of each municipality, principal and teacher to decide how a policy is effected in practice. Such support may therefore differ considerably between municipalities and schools and depend on a number of local factors, such as teachers’ experience or available funding.

The aim of this study is to investigate how Swedish policy reforms to improve reading ability among pupils at elementary level, enshrined in the Education Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800), are operationalised and implemented in one Swedish municipality during school year 2018/2019.

The present study is guided by the following research questions

1. How are reforms in terms of early identification of reading difficulties and additional reading support operationalised in the municipality’s regulations?

2. To what extent are the municipality’s regulations regarding additional reading support implemented at the municipality’s compulsory schools?

3. What are the chances and challenges of implementing these regulations according to three special needs teachers?
The municipality involved in this study is medium sized and comprises a city, some villages and industrial communities. The schools are located in rural and urban areas. Swedish compulsory education comprises grade 0 up to grade 9. At the time of the study, there were 49 schools at this level in the municipality. Depending on location and catchment area, there is considerable variation between the schools with regard to span of grades and number of pupils. See Table 1 for a survey of school types represented in the study.

In the municipality a literacy network for teachers and special needs teachers has been initiated. Its aim is to deepen and develop the participants’ skills and methods for working with communication, reading and writing. The participants are selected by their principals and represent either an individual school or a school area. They are meant to be a resource and support for the principals when organising, developing and implementing high-quality reading and writing education. At regular seminars the participants receive information from the national centre for language, reading and writing development, discuss research in the field, exchange experiences and reflect on their own practice. The network is organised by a literacy development coordinator, a post specifically created for the development of a joint reading and writing strategy in the municipality.

### Method

**Procedure and materials**

In the first step the municipality’s official regulation documents were collected and analysed regarding efforts for early identification of reading difficulties and implementation of additional reading support. The local documents were compared with the regulations formulated in the Educational act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800) for the purpose of finding out whether further guidelines had been added by the municipality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. School types represented in this study.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Grade 0 1</td>
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<td>• Grade 0 – grade 3 3</td>
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<td>• Grade 1 – grade 3</td>
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<td>• Grade 1 – grade 6</td>
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<td>• Grade 4 – grade 9 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Grade 7 – grade 9 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Grade 0 – grade 9 8</td>
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<td>• Grade 0 – grade 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Grade 6 – grade 9 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context

The municipality involved in this study is medium sized and comprises a city, some villages and industrial communities. The schools are located in rural and urban areas. Swedish compulsory education comprises grade 0 up to grade 9. At the time of the study, there were 49 schools at this level in the municipality. Depending on location and catchment area, there is considerable variation between the schools with regard to span of grades and number of pupils. See Table 1 for a survey of school types represented in the study.

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Taking departure from the results in step one, a digital questionnaire was distributed to teachers and special teachers at all the 49 schools in the municipality in order to obtain an overall picture of how intensive reading periods were implemented. The section evaluated in this paper consisted of five closed questions, was written in Google Forms and distributed via Google Education. The respondents were informed that it was voluntary to participate in the study. The questionnaire was returned by 57 teachers, out of whom 56 agreed to participate representing 38 schools. As there was sometimes more than one response from a school, for example when different teachers answered the questionnaire for primary and secondary grades, we summarised the data available for each school. The summaries were sent back to each school in order for the teachers to confirm, change or complement the data if necessary. A small number of minor changes were made.

After analysing the data collected in step one and two, interviews with three special needs teachers, Anna, Britt and Clara, at different schools in the municipality were conducted. The selection of teachers was based on results of the questionnaire analysis and the names are pseudonyms. Anna represents a school where intensive reading periods are implemented in all grades available, Britt a school where intensive reading periods are not implemented at all, and Clara a school where intensive reading periods are implemented only in some of the grades available. The teachers were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview data consists of altogether 103 minutes of recording and 13,636 words of transcription.

Analysis

The questionnaire answers were compiled and transferred to Microsoft Excel. The schools were coded according to their grade span. The coding is illustrated in Table 2.

The answers were analysed regarding the type of school and the following five questionnaire questions.

- Does the school work with intensive reading periods?
- In which grades are intensive reading periods provided?
- Are intensive reading periods provided individually, in pairs or small groups?
- How many consecutive weeks are intensive reading periods provided?
- How long is each session?

Table 2. Coding of the participating schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade span</th>
<th>Number of schools</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>E</td>
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<tr>
<td>0–9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
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</table>
These questions are based on the results of the analysis of the municipality’s regulation documents in the first step and thus focus on “intensive reading periods” as the type of additional reading support prescribed by the municipality.

The interview data was analysed qualitatively by content according to the coding methods described by Creswell (2014). The first author read the transcripts for overall content, coded them and created four themes which covered (1) information regarding the individual teacher’s working conditions, i.e. employment rate and work responsibilities, (2) background information obtained from the respective school in the questionnaire, i.e. to what extent intensive reading periods were implemented at the respective school, (3) teachers’ views on the national and municipality guidelines for provision of additional reading support in terms of intensive reading periods and (4) experienced chances and challenges connected to this. Statements from the three teachers were then assigned to the four themes. In a second step, the second author read through the transcripts and the classification of statements. Disagreements and unclarities were discussed between the two researchers and were resolved.

**Results**

As regards RQ1, the analysis of the municipality’s regulation documents revealed that since 2015 an action plan guides the work regarding the provision of reading support at all the 49 schools. The annual updates of the action plan are based on results in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Screening</th>
<th>Support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Bornholm (from 2019 Hitta språket)</td>
<td>Additional adjustments, special support, intensive training periods (prioritised)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bedömningsstöd</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bedömningsstöd</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods (prioritised)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>National assessment Grade 3</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods (prioritised)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>DLS (Diagnostiskt material för analys av läs- och skrivförmåga) läshastighet av skönlitterär text samt rättstavning (reading fluency of fictional texts and spelling)</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DLS ordförståelse och läsförståelse (word comprehension and reading comprehension)</td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>National assessment Grade 6</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>DLS läsförståelse (reading comprehension)</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>National assessment Grade 9</td>
<td>Additional adjustments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special support: intensive training periods</td>
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</table>
national assessments and suggested in cooperation with the above-mentioned literacy development leader.

The action plan summarises the results of the mandatory assessments as well as the prescribed minimum support for pupils who fail or risk failing to achieve the knowledge and skill requirements for the respective grade. Table 3 summarises the 2018 mandatory screening and support actions in relation to reading competence for the schools involved. The screening instruments in bold letters are those prescribed by the national guidelines, all others are added by the municipality as additional means to follow up students’ reading development.

Further, the analysis shows that the municipality prescribes intensive reading periods as the major extra reading support for pupils with reading difficulties throughout all grades 0–9. The principals at each school are responsible for the implementation of the action plan, while the teachers are responsible for the realisation of screenings and support actions on class or individual level.

As regards RQ2, the questionnaire results reveal that intensive reading periods are implemented by a majority of the participating schools, but not always consistently in all grades as prescribed by the municipality (see Table 4). Note that provision of intensive reading periods in grade 0 was not required at that time of the study.

In summary, 34 out of 38 schools provide intensive reading periods, and 20 schools provide these in all grades available. If schools do not provide intensive reading periods in all available grades, there is a tendency that additional reading support is no longer provided in highest grades. At two schools, no additional reading support was provided in grade 1, but started in grade 2 or later. The three schools hosting only grades 7–9 did not provide any support in terms of intensive reading periods.

In relation to the group size in which intensive reading periods are provided the survey revealed that all schools that provide these offer individualised intensive reading periods, i.e. one-to-one teacher-pupil instruction. 50% of these schools also provide pair and/or small group instruction. The three options are represented at all school types and no clear trend regarding the form of additional reading support in relation to school type is visible.

Regarding the frequency of intensive reading periods provided, the participating schools differ clearly. Ranging between four and 12 weeks, some schools providing a fixed number of weeks, others a rather flexible span. The B-schools offer between five and seven weeks, the C-schools from four up to ten weeks, the D-school seven weeks and the F-schools between six and 12 weeks. Even within the same school category, large differences could be observed. While one C-school seems to offer a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Grade span</th>
<th>Overall nr. of schools</th>
<th>Nr. of schools which provide intensive reading periods in all grades</th>
<th>Nr. of schools which provide intensive reading periods in some grades (in parentheses which grades)</th>
<th>Nr. of schools which do not provide intensive reading periods at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>0–3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>0–6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5 (1–4, 2–3, 1–4, 1–3, 1–3)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4–9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (4–6)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>0–9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (2–9, 1–6, 1–7, 6–8, 1–5, 1–3, 1–3, 4–9)</td>
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fixed number of four weeks’ intensive reading instruction, another C-school offers between eight and ten. The same goes for one F-school, which offers six weeks of intensive reading to pupils in need of additional reading support, while another one offers 12 weeks. For a majority of the schools the length of the individual intensive reading sessions ranged 15 and 30 minutes. Only one C-school provided intensive reading sessions of 50 minutes each. Regarding school type and session length no specific trend could be observed.

In order to find out what the chances and challenges of implementing the regulations in practice are, as formulated in RQ3, three teachers were interviewed with the aim of comparing their views on the rationales for the implementation of additional reading support in terms of intensive reading periods at their respective schools.

Anna works at an F-school enrolling 380 pupils, where she and two more special needs teachers are employed full-time. She has the overall responsibility that pupils, risking not to achieve the knowledge requirements, are provided with the necessary support. This may include the planning, support and evaluation of screenings, advising teachers regarding adjustment of the learning environment, and working with prevention of health-related issues. Anna also introduces additional adjustments and special support, for example intensive reading periods. These are provided throughout all grades by the three special needs teachers. The explicit goal at this school is to identify every pupil with some type of reading difficulty up to grade 9 and provide appropriate reading support as long as needed. The school employs a tight system of screening and follow-up mechanisms. For example, regular class screenings in decoding are carried out up to grade 6, as the screenings prescribed by the municipality are considered insufficient in identifying poor decoders and pupils with dyslexia, particularly in grades 4–6. Identified pupils are further tested in individual screenings to define the particular area of difficulty.

Even though intensive reading periods at this school are offered in all grades, the ambition is to concentrate these on grades 1–6. However, according to Anna it does not make sense to withdraw the training when pupils are 12–13 years old. They need support in further developing a good strategy. From grade 7 and upwards the decision about continuing such additional reading support activities is made by the pupils themselves. They have the opportunity to participate in intensive reading periods and/or are provided with appropriate compensation tools, such as text-to-speech and audio material, in class.

In order to keep the number of pupils who need intensive reading periods as low as possible, Anna’s school provides the special needs personnel with in-service training, coaching teachers in all subjects about the importance of reading and reading instruction. The assumption is that advanced reading instruction in class will help preventing more pupils from developing reading difficulties, so that more resources can be allocated to supporting those with the most severe difficulties. Anna describes the change of teachers and special needs personnel as a big risk. When working with pupils with reading and other learning difficulties specially trained staff is the base for meaningful and effective decisions regarding additional reading support. She considers it as crucial that at her school a highly qualified colleague coordinates the work and makes sure that despite changes in staff, a consistent strategy is employed, so that no pupil is left behind.
Britt is a special needs teacher at an E-school. 300 pupils attend this school and Britt, who works full-time and is the only employed special needs teacher, is responsible for two thirds of these pupils. Britt’s responsibilities include a wide range of activities. She conducts an annual diagnostic test in Swedish with all pupils as they enter the school in grade 7. Further, she advises teachers and the special need teacher how to identify pupils with reading difficulties. She also conducts additional screenings if required, suggests action programmes for pupils in need of additional support, teaches smaller groups out of class and advises teachers regarding adjustments in teaching, teaching material and assessment. It is also her responsibility to support teachers during lessons and to participate in interdisciplinary meetings regarding health and development of students with special needs.

Britt’s school does not offer intensive reading and according to Britt mainly due to inadequate financial resources. She adds that there has been an attempt to implement such periods, but was considered financially unsustainable to focus on only one pupil at a time. Instead, the pupils are provided with compensation tools. Britt believes that even though additional reading support in terms of intensive reading periods are most successful in earlier grades, they would also help pupils in grades 7–9 improve their reading skills, as they open the possibility to individualise additional reading support. Britt has tried to influence the principal to re-establish the provision of intensive reading periods in the future, but accepts that the school must give priorities when it comes to the spending of resources available.

Clara works at a C-school enrolling 290 pupils. She works full-time together with another special needs teacher at this school. Additionally, there is a full-time pedagogical resource person with a focus on pupils learning Swedish as second language. Clara is responsible for app. 180 pupils. Her responsibilities comprise providing teachers, pupils and their guardians with special educational support and advice, organising interdisciplinary meetings and meetings with teachers regarding students’ health and development as well as providing pupils with intensive reading periods. Intensive reading periods are only available in grades 2 and 3. According to Clara grade 1 is normally dedicated to intensive reading instruction in class anyway, and in grades 4 and 5 the majority of pupils will have developed functioning reading strategies. If not, they will be offered compensation tools and/or more time for examination. Clara admits that a continuation of intensive reading periods in grades 4 and 5 might favour some pupils, but that the school’s general approach is that only students with specific reading difficulties, such as dyslexia, are to be offered continued additional reading support.

The challenges Clara describes concern the resources available in relation to the number of pupils in need of intensive reading periods. Two teachers carry out intensive reading periods with a maximum of three pupils at a time. However, for reasons of pupils’ different proficiency levels and class schedules the teachers often work with only one pupil at a time, which demands more resources. She estimates that such periods make up app. 20% of her working time. Most often, the intensive reading periods are scheduled for the last 20 minutes of a lesson, which may make the work difficult as pupils are already tired when the session starts. A prioritisation of additional reading support in the daily school routine would allow work in small groups and increase efficiency of the sessions. Clara argues, based on her experience, that one-to-one tuition is overall the most effective additional reading support for the majority of pupils.
Another challenge is how to continue work after the intensive reading periods. Her opinion is that even if some pupils experience a boost in reading motivation, only continuous practice will lead to substantial progress. However, neither teachers nor special needs teachers are scheduled for this, due to all their other obligations.

Clara also remarks that not all teachers show an understanding for some pupils’ need of intensive reading periods and tend to express disapproval of special needs teachers taking pupils from regular classes. She argues that it would reduce the number of pupils with reading difficulties if the entire school were to begin focusing on reading competence development, and if more time was dedicated to reading practice, for example by scheduling all teachers for regular sessions dedicated to reading.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to investigate how Swedish policy reforms to improve, reading ability among pupils in compulsory school, enshrined in the Education Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800), are operationalised and implemented in a Swedish municipality. We examined different levels of implementation: how national guidelines are transformed into the municipality’s local regulations, and how these regulations are implemented at the municipality’s schools, and what the potential chances and challenges are.

Based on the analysis of the municipality’s regulations the study indicated that on paper the national guidelines are followed and even complemented with additional actions in order to reach the overall goal of improving pupils’ reading competence. The number of prescribed screenings and the choice of intensive reading periods as prioritised methods for support throughout all grades of compulsory school are documented in an action plan, which shows a willingness and an ambition to create a tight network for the identification of reading difficulties and immediate remediation.

However, policy enactment in terms of implementation of regulations on a school level can be a complex process dependent on a variety of factors (cf. Van Metre & Horn, 1975). Our analysis also points to this complexity by revealing that there is a disjunction between policy and practice in the municipality and that policy enactment differs strongly between the municipality’s schools. The questionnaire data showed differences with regard to the provision of reading periods: some schools do not provide them at all, some schools only in certain grades, and schools also differ noticeably in relation to the length and frequency of reading periods.

An obvious rationale for the differences are the financial resources available at a school. The budgetary situation and the distribution of resources are often mentioned as reasons for divergences between policy and practice (cf. Braun et al., 2011; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). In this study, the allocation of financial resources for the implementation of the municipality’s regulations also seems to be an obstacle for policy enactment, as pointed out in the interviews. Budgetary considerations are for example reflected in the number of special needs staff employed at each school. Further, it was mentioned that digital tools compensating for reading difficulties get chosen over the provision of intensive reading periods, at least in some of the available grades. Special needs teachers’ pedagogical considerations lying behind this decision are by no means questioned here. However, from a school perspective, this prioritisation is likely to also
contain a financial component, as these tools and programmes, in contrast to resource-demanding individual intensive reading periods, are considered teacher-independent, often represent a one-time cost and can be utilised for a higher number of pupils. This example of adapting to the specific circumstances at a school highlights the role that principals and teachers as end users of policy have when shaping the concrete realisation of regulations (Fullan, 2015). It shows that policy translation on the ground can be selective, based on what is considered legitimate within the school’s local context, i.e. available resources in relation to number of students in need of extra support (Braun et al., 2011; Schulte, 2018).

Considering this variation in the light of the municipality’s ambitious action plan it can be argued in line with Schulte (2018) and Ramirez (2012) that the municipality’s policy to some degree simulates an improved system, but in reality, still lacks resources required to make comprehensive changes. However, this discrepancy between policy and policy enactment might not entirely originate in the shortage of financial resources, but also in policy-makers’ insufficient understanding of local conditions at the schools and practicalities required (Ramirez, 2012).

Besides the fact that some schools did not implement intensive reading periods or only partly did so, although prescribed by the municipality, there are clear differences regarding the way they are implemented. Some schools reported a range of weeks due to the expected variation among pupils. However, as this is not specified in the action plan, it remains open to interpretation for individual principals and teachers (cf. Bell & Stevenson, 2015). It might be argued that handing over this responsibility to the schools provides them with the necessary freedom to distribute their resources according to their own needs. However, as regards the reported differences between schools, it can be questioned whether all pupils are really offered equal opportunities for additional reading if policy-makers leave such a wide space of interpretation to the actors.

Another result of the present study is that the successful implementation of intensive reading periods may depend on a school’s ethos (cf. Braun et al., 2011), especially in relation to teachers’ and principals’ willingness to engage in policy enactment (cf. Fullan, 2015; Malen, 2006). Concerns were raised about a lack of understanding and support for special needs teachers’ work among colleagues and about the scheduling of intensive reading periods after regular lessons, which may result in tired and unfocused pupils. Another concern expressed by a special needs teacher is class teachers’ disapproval when pupils are taken from the regular class for individual additional reading support, or a preconceived idea that only special needs teachers are responsible for supporting pupils with learning difficulties. On the other hand, a school with a holistic view on how to meet the needs of students with reading difficulties is described. This view is for example reflected in offering special needs coaching days for class teachers or in securing that a consequent special needs strategy is employed. These individual experiences exemplify the considerable impact of individual actors’ understanding of and support for new policies on how these are transformed to educational practice to meet policy makers’ goals (cf. Fullan, 2015).

The results of this study exemplify how Swedish policy reforms related to reading development may be realised on the municipal level. Even though local policy-makers may have high ambitions to meet the overall national goal of improving reading ability among pupils, a number of factors influence principals’ and teachers’ enactment of reforms. Limited financial resources, schools’ context-dependened prioritisation of
support actions, actors’ willingness to engage into policy changes, but also space for interpretation of how regulations are to be carried out locally may lead to considerable variation when turning policy to practice. To some degree, such variation may be inevitable due to heterogenous local contexts. However, for every pupil to be given a “guarantee to read” and provided with additional support if needed, as the Education Act (Skollag, 2010, p. 800) states, education policy must also consider ways to deal with factors that facilitate policy enactment despite local differences and secure equality between municipalities, schools and pupils.

Although a case study like the present one cannot give a conclusive overview of how policy reforms aimed at supporting and increasing reading ability are implemented in the Swedish context, it does allow some degree of generalisability. Our investigation was conducted in a medium-sized municipality, which in its diverse composition and the overall catchment area, including both rural and urban zones, can be regarded as representative of quite a large number of Swedish municipalities. Further, we collected data material from 78% of the municipality’s schools and therefore were able to cover a relatively high proportion of all compulsory schools. By including the analysis of the municipality’s regulation documents, school survey data and interviews with practitioners, we have managed to give a comprehensive account of the implementation of policy reforms at the local level. Further studies might include interviews with politicians, school principals, subject teachers and other actors involved in order to explore the rationales influencing decisions when reforms are implemented in a municipality. To our knowledge no studies so far have focused on this issue in the Swedish context, so our study also gives new insights in a field that needs more attention in research.

Notes

1. In the original: ”En individs förmåga att förstå, använda och reflektera över och engagera sig i texter för att uppnå sina egna mål, utveckla sina kunskaper och sin potential och för att delta i samhället.”
2. The Swedish National Agency for Education.
3. The Swedish School Inspectorate.
4. In Sweden there are special needs teachers and special education teachers. While the focus of a special needs teacher is advising and supporting class teachers as well as working with individual students, the special education teacher works primarily on an organisational level and coordinates work in relation to pupils with special needs on a school-level. In practice, however, working responsibilities often overlap. In this article, we only use the term special needs teacher, but refer to both professions.

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