

How do Teachers and Personnel in Preschool and School in a Swedish Municipality Look upon their Work with Children in Need of Special Educational Support?

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Abstract

A survey was carried out in a Swedish municipality between December 2008 and February 2009. The study is part of a larger research project and describes special educational activities in preschools and schools. All pedagogical personnel in the municipality are involved in this study. This paper is based upon a first analysis of a questionnaire which was answered by 983 of the 1345 people asked (73 % response). The aim of this study is to illustrate present situations and requirements that teachers and other staff members describe. Perspectives and attitudes among the personnel concerning work with children in need of special educational support are also illuminated.

The result shows that the majority of the staff feels that they receive support, or quite a lot of support, from their pedagogical team concerning their work with children in need of special support. They do not express receiving the same support from their school's headmasters. The result also shows that most of the participants feel that the municipal and the national guiding principles and evaluations for children in need of special educational support are rather vague or very vague. Quite a few of the participants answer that they do not know about these specific guiding principles or evaluations. More than six out of ten who answered the survey say that they want to discuss how the team meets children in need and children's need in general. Almost 30 % of the personnel answered that they have a small, or a very small, possibility of helping children to achieve their educational goals. More than 62 % of the personnel mentioned that only a few of the children in need of special educational support get such support.

A follow-up-survey with the staff's headmasters was also carried out in May of 2009. Forty-five out of forty-five headmasters answered (100 % response).

A cultural-historical approach was taken. Theories have been used from Vygotsky, Leontiev and Engeström in a deeper analysis. Through the analysis the researcher has the possibility of getting a closer look upon contradictions, and the zone of proximal development, in relation to different levels of activity systems (school and organization).

Key words: Children in need of special educational support, preschool/school, project work, activity theory, survey, municipality

Introduction

Background

The Swedish compulsory school system is governed by School Law (Skollagen), Compulsory School Regulations (Skolförordningen) and the Curricula for the Compulsory School System, the Preschool Class and the Leisure-time centre (Lpo 94). The idea of an inclusive school has been strong in Sweden since the compulsory school was founded in 1962. When the compulsory school was introduced in 1962, the need of supportive measures drastically increased in Swedish schools (Isaksson, 2009). Simultaneously, the resources required for pupils in need of special educational support have been up for debate both within schools and in society. The idea of an inclusive school, which has been, and still is, crucial in the Swedish school system was reinforced by the concept "A school for all" which has its origins in the curricula from 1980 (Lgr 80). The meaning of this concept is that all pupils have the right to an equal education. There has been an ambition in Swedish school politics to educate all pupils in the same classroom and avoid segregation. Research shows that schools have had difficulties in fulfilling these intentions and the ability for schools to handle pupils' differences have varied throughout the years. The National Agency for Education (Skolverket) shows in a report that approximately 20 percent of students in Swedish compulsory schools receive special educational support (Skolverket, 2003). Of course this depends on how students in need of special educational support are defined as a group. The Swedish school law prescribes that "special educational support shall be given to pupils who have difficulties in their schoolwork" (SFS 1985:1100, *the authors' translation*). In other words, pupils in need have the right to receive special educational support. This is not always implemented in practice. Implementation of this law demands considerable resources from schools which would allow personnel to observe students, discover possible difficulties and subsequently offer them adequate support. These pupils in need of special educational support have often been the object of special education teachers' commitment in Sweden (Isaksson, 2009).

International studies also show that special education teachers take a central role in their schools' support of pupils in need of special educational assistance. Special education teachers are seen as knowledge sources and brokers of information. The rest of the schools' community see them as epistemic resources and trust their expertise and appreciate their professional skills and competence. The special education teachers were often left outside the network of informal interactions in the school community (Tuomainen, Palonen & Hakkarainen, 2008).

The Swedish Compulsory School Regulations and the School Law are comparatively vague in their definitions of which pupils are supposed to be given special support. This permits municipalities, and schools within municipalities, to have their own interpretation of these laws and regulations since the municipalities have relatively large freedom to design their own agenda in relation to national guide lines for pupils in need of special educational support (Nilholm et al, 2007). However inspections and quality reviews are regularly carried out by The Swedish School Inspection Agency (Isaksson, 2009). An international document that Swedish schools and municipalities have to conform to is The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) which states guide lines for special educational support.

Swedish childcare is an activity which is open for all children between one and five years of age taking different forms such as daycare homes and preschools. Children are placed in preschool or daycare homes for a small fee based on parents' income. Children in Sweden have the right to 525 hours of childcare per year free of charge from the age of four. Preschool is governed by the School Law (chapter 2) and the Curricula for Preschool (Lpfö 98). The preschool in Sweden is a pedagogical activity which, according to municipal law, should be planned and continuously

evaluated by the preschool personnel and the municipality (www.skolverket.se). According to Swedish school law, preschools must provide resource based on the needs of each particular child. Therefore children in need of special attention should be given extra resources. In a newly published report from The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2008) the commissioners state that the percentage of children in need of special support in preschool has increased during the last ten years. They also point out that the support which has been given to these children often is insufficient. The report also shows that there are not enough educated preschool teachers in Swedish preschools.

Since the research and project presented in this paper draws attention to children between 1 and 16 years of age, the researchers decided to call this group "Children in need of special educational support". This includes all children who are at risk of not reaching the national goals for the compulsory school (Nilholm et al, 2007).

Thus the purpose of Swedish schools is to assist children in their efforts to reach national educational goals. According to the Swedish curricula, schools should pay particular attention to children who are at risk of marginalization.

All who work in the pre-school should

- co-operate to provide a good environment for development, play and learning, and pay particular attention to and help those children who for different reasons need support in their development.(Lpfö 98:10)

All who work in the school should:

- be observant of and help pupils in need of special support and
- co-operate in order to make the school a good environment for learning and development. (Lpo 94:13)

The work to create a stimulating environment for children and pupils in preschool and school can be described as a challenge in a complex context and as a learning process throughout time. Wetso (2006) describes several components that have to be added if a negative activity is supposed to turn around and become a more positive activity. Adults as well as children need support to manage change so that a development in children can occur.

To know what can be done when working with children in need of special educational support, imbalances in an activity need to be made visible. The concept of imbalances can be related to the practice of (micro) power in which various elements in any group of people exhibit different levels of influence and exert their own interpretations on innumerable topics such as children's educational needs or the needs of vulnerable groups in society. This becomes an important issue when appraising the needs of individuals and groups of individuals (Foucault referred to in Persson, 1997). Engeström (1987) created an analytical model which depicts a human activity system. This model can be applied to any system. The system can be an individual, an organization, or a complete society which is analysed as a whole and in parts (Engeström, 1987, Knutagård, 2003). A municipality can be seen as a sort of activity system (Engeström, 1987) where different motives, needs and scarcities affect actions and shape the daily activities in a complex social network (Leontiev, 1986). There are also contradictions in the system of activity which can lead to dilemmas (double binds). Only when these contradictions are revealed is it possible to advance further in the activity system (Engeström, 1987). The zone of proximal development for the activity system can be made visible (Vygotsky 1978, Engeström, 1987).

A provisional reformulation of the zone of proximal development is now possible. It is the *distance between the present everyday actions of the individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in the everyday actions.* (Engeström 1987:94)

Earlier studies show (Ström, 1999) that making the zone of proximal development visible, and revealing contradictions in an activity system, is complicated. It can be difficult for the participants to feel involved and engaged enough in a project to be able to discern strong contradictions in activity systems (in schools for example) so that the zone of proximal development has consequences for the activity system. Ström (1999) illustrates prerequisites and opportunities for development for special education teachers' activity in various Finnish Upper Secondary Schools. Ström (1999) writes that the initiative for defining the activity system is often left to the researcher and that can be an obstacle in the work of development:

Also, the starting-point was not the special teachers' concrete problems related to their activity and their desire to solve these problems, but the initiative was mine, which probably affected the process as a whole. (Ström, 1999:257)

Ström (1999) also states that the possibilities of development are connected with external society-oriented factors as well as with internal school-related factors. She mentions social, political and economic factors. Economic conditions in the state and municipality affect the shaping of the educational sector. School legislation, as a political will, is central as well. The possibilities of developing special educational activities are furthermore linked to a school's organization. The solution, according to Ström (1999) and other researchers (cf. Fullan, 1992) is to create preconditions for dialogue and reflection that advances a school system into an open and dynamic organization.

The goals for pedagogical activities in schools can be read in the Swedish curricula. However schools and municipalities do not always use their resources effectively to reach these goals. Wetso (2006) shows how pedagogical planning and efforts strengthen the children's chances to become a part of "the pedagogical room" when favorable conditions are created (Wetso, 2006). Earlier research is a starting point for the study presented in this paper and the municipality in question is investigated as an activity system with contradictions, scarcities and possibilities.

Theories and perspectives

During 2006-2007, a research team wrote a report titled "The municipalities' work with pupils in need of special educational support" (Nilholm et al, 2007:2). The report is the first of its kind in Sweden. There are 290 municipalities in Sweden and 90 % of the municipalities answered a questionnaire. The survey gives a comprehensive picture of how the work with pupils in need of special educational support is organized and interpreted in different municipalities in Sweden. The result of this study shows:

- The most important conclusions from the study are that the alternative perspective has received a position in the municipalities' descriptions of their work with children in need of support.
- In a longer time range it is also apparent that a displacement of perspectives has occurred even if the elements of the traditional point of view still are obvious.
- The study also shows that many pupils who are entitled to support do not receive such support.
- It is also obvious that the municipalities define "in need of special educational support" differently. (Nilholm et al 2007:2. *The authors' translation*).

The alternative perspective sees students' needs, as they appear in different situations, in a wider perspective when conditions, circumstances and environment are taken in to consideration. For example, the alternative perspective can be used when schools interpret how pupils achieve their goals. In the traditional perspective, students in need of special educational support are seen as being the source of the students' educational difficulties and other factors are not taken in to

consideration. Pupils and children are seen as the ones who need to change or improve. The national report referred to above gives a comprehensive picture of how resources are used to assist pupils in need of special educational support in different municipalities in Sweden. The report illustrates the extent of needs in Swedish schools and municipalities, but it also shows that the interpretation of the definition of who is in need of support was different in different municipalities. Different criteria and perspectives can have consequences for the distribution of resources (Nilholm et al 2007).

According to activity- theory and social constructivism, social reality and conceptions about phenomena will be seen as constructed, and something that is created in interaction between humans when they understand and make the world understandable. Our conceptions can be said to be influenced by context and norms, values and the culture that exists in the current society. Values are relative and vary from time to time (Vygotsky, 1999, Leontiev, 1986, Engeström 1987, Säljö 2000, Isaksson 2009). With a cultural- historical approach, children´s difficulties can be understood and interpreted differently during different epochs and in different cultures (Säljö, 2000). A perspective which can be connected to social constructivism and to the area concerning children in need of special educational support is the alternative perspective (or the so called perspective of relations, *the authors´ translation*, Persson, 2001) On the basis of this perspective on special educational activity and children in need of special educational support the focus is on the interaction and collaboration between different participants. Difficulties can be seen as social constructions (Isaksson, 2009).

Relevance of the presented study

There is a lack of more encompassing studies which address how teachers and personnel explain, understand and experience their work with children in need of special educational support. This lack is visible in a broader context, in activity systems within schools and within municipalities in a Swedish school context. This study is the first of its kind in Sweden.

The study presented in this paper is a case study. The case study is distinguished by its focus on describing and identifying a certain phenomenon in a system with rather legible boundaries (Merriam, 1994). It indicates something about how teachers and personnel in preschool and school in a Swedish municipality look upon their work with children in need of special educational support. The result of the study cannot be claimed to be valid in general and does not reflect upon all Swedish municipalities.

Research questions and the aim of this study

The purpose of this study is to illustrate present situations that teachers and staff members experience, and requirements that teachers and staff members describe in a Swedish municipality. The aim is also to illuminate perspectives and attitudes among the teachers and staff members concerning work with children in need of special support.

The questions which this research project addressed were the following:
How do teachers and personnel in preschools (age 1-5) and schools (grades 1-9) in a Swedish municipality consider their work with children in need of special educational support and their own special educational activities?
How can the zone of proximal development in an activity system be made visible?
How can the work with children in need of special support in a municipality be developed?

Setting and participants

During the period between December 2008 and February 2009, all teachers, resource staff and preschool staff (i.e. not only those working with children in need of special support) were given a

questionnaire (1345 persons). The municipality is situated in the middle of Sweden with approximately 55.000 inhabitants. This research project was the first step in a more comprehensive project which at the time had just been initiated by politicians and school administrators in the municipality.

Data collection and methods

A pilot survey was carried out in October 2008. Twelve persons with diverse pedagogical backgrounds from another municipality were given the questionnaire. The feedback which was received from the participants in this pilot survey was positive and only minor changes needed to be made to the survey which has now been given to the actual test group.

The survey was designed to reveal the schools' personnel's experience and perspective working with children in need of special educational support. The questions also focused on education, other activities in schools and preschools, personnel's influence over their work with children in need and the personnel's ability to prevent children from being in need of special support. In addition, the questionnaire paid attention to themes such as team work, support from school management, and school personnel's perception of municipal and national guiding principles and evaluations.

The names and place of work of participants in this study was collected by the researchers from the municipality for the academic year 2008-2009. The questionnaire was sent out by mail to the participant's residential address. Two reminders were also sent to participants when necessary. The second reminder also contained a new questionnaire in case the participant had lost the first one.

Out of the original 1345 staff members who were asked to respond to the questionnaire, 983 answered (73 % response). Upon the completion of the survey, the municipality provided the researchers with a list of the total number of participants in each occupational category. Since participants who answered the survey provided information regarding their occupation, it was possible for the researchers to ascertain that those who did not answer the questionnaire consisted of an even distribution of different occupations. No profession was therefore over- or underrepresented in the survey.

When the questionnaires were received, quantitative data was attained and interpreted through frequencies and percent. The statistical program, SPSS, version 16, was used for analyzing the data. The result is mostly presented by bar charts and pie charts.

Of the participants answering the questionnaire 85, 5 % were women and 14, 5 % were men, 75 % had a university degree and 69, 8 % had a pedagogical degree and 77 % of the personnel stated that they had been in their current position 6 years or longer.

This study is part of a larger research project. Therefore the headmasters of the personnel were questioned as well. That was done in a web-survey later on the same year, in May 2009. 45 out of 45 headmasters (100% response) answered the survey. The answers from the headmasters will be presented in an article not yet published.

Results

The result of this study will be presented in bar charts, pie charts, tables and text. The figures have been translated from Swedish to English.

Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the support teachers and other staff members perceive they receive from their pedagogical team and the support they perceive they receive from their headmasters. The bar charts show that the personnel perceived to get very good, or rather good support, from their pedagogical team. The personnel answered less often that they had very good support from their headmaster. It was more often the case that they had rather bad support from the school's head.

52. Vilket stöd känner du att du får av ditt arbetslag då det gäller arbetet med barn i behov av särskilt stöd?

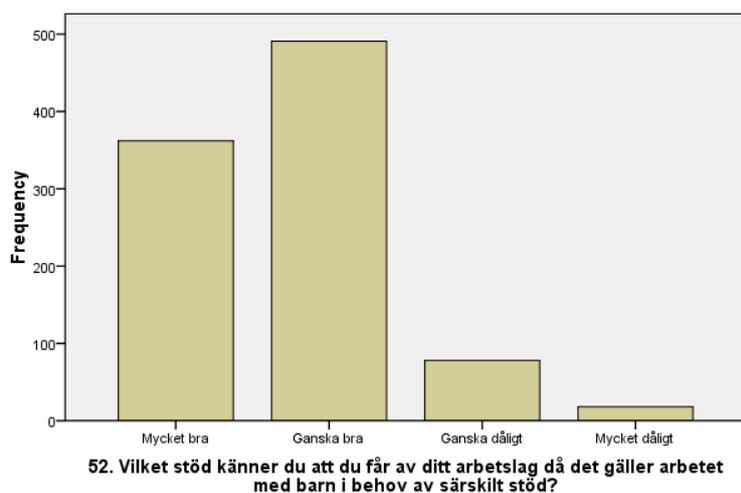


Figure 1: How much support do you feel that you receive from your pedagogical team when working with children in need of special educational support? (From the left; Very good, Rather good, Rather bad, Very Bad)

53. Vilket stöd känner du att du får av skolledningen då det gäller arbetet med barn i behov av särskilt stöd?

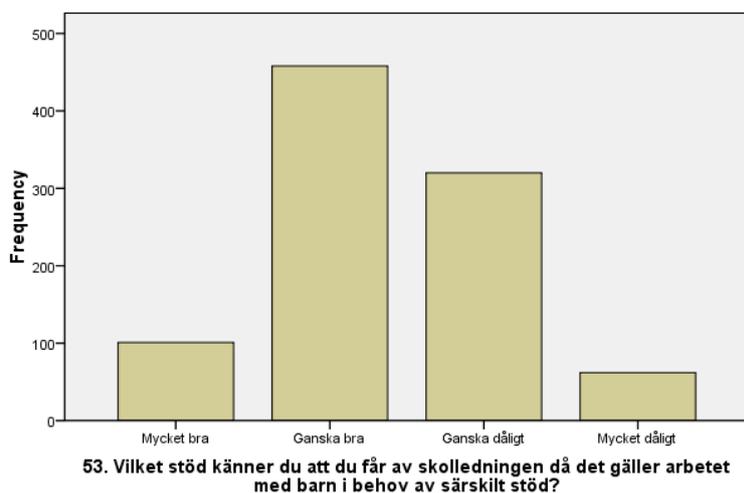


Figure 2: How much support do you feel that you receive from your school administration when working with children in need of special educational support? (From the left; Very good, Rather good, Rather bad, Very Bad)

Figure 3 and 4 illustrate the participant's perception of the clarity of municipal and national guiding principles for children in need of special support. The bar chart reveals that many of the informants thought that the guide lines were rather understandable or rather vague but approximately 300 persons couldn't discern whether the principles were clear or not.

43. Hur tydliga tycker du att de statliga riktlinjerna är för ditt arbete med barn i behov av särskilt stöd?

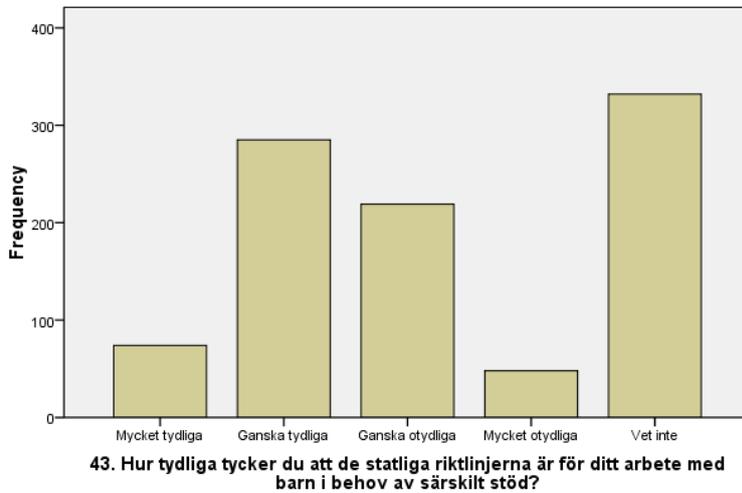


Figure 3: How clear do you think the national guiding principles are regarding children in need of special educational support? (From the left; Very clear, Rather clear, Rather vague, Very vague, Don't know)

44. Hur tydliga tycker du att de kommunala riktlinjerna är för ditt arbete med barn i behov av särskilt stöd?

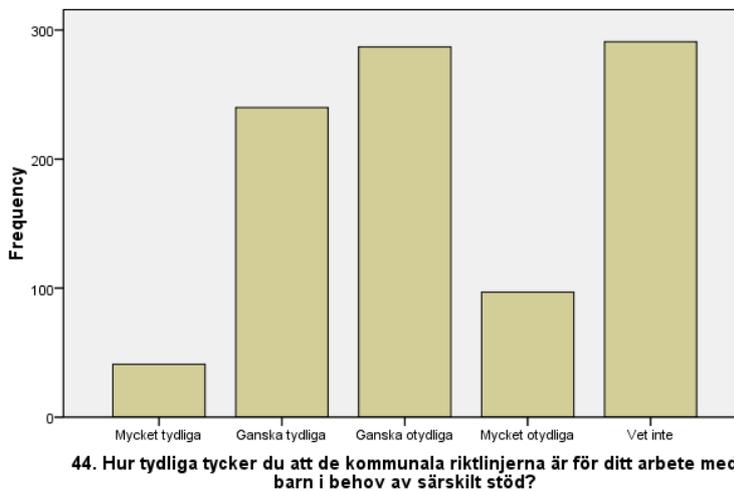


Figure 4: How understandable do you think the municipal guiding principles are for your work with children in need of special educational support? (From the left; Very understandable, Rather understandable, Rather vague, Very vague, Don't know)

Figure 5 and 6 illustrate the participants' perception of the national and the municipal evaluation of the personnel's work with children in need of special support. The result indicates that almost all of the participants thought the evaluations done by the state and the municipality were rather vague, very vague or that they didn't know how the evaluation was done.

46. Hur tycker du att statens uppföljning och utvärdering av ditt arbete med barn i behov av särskilt stöd fungerar?

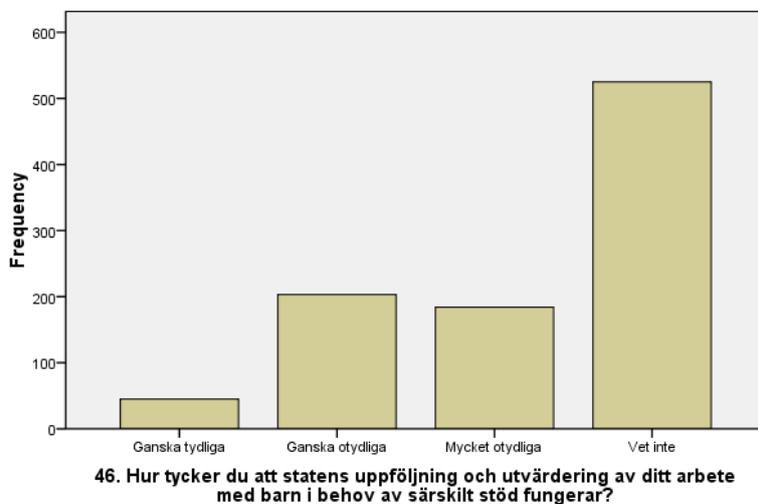


Figure 5: Do you think the evaluation of your work with children in special educational needs, done by the state, is functional? (From the left; Very well (no response), Rather well, Rather poorly, Very poorly, Don't know)

47. Hur tycker du att kommunens uppföljning och utvärdering av ditt arbete med barn i behov av särskilt stöd fungerar?

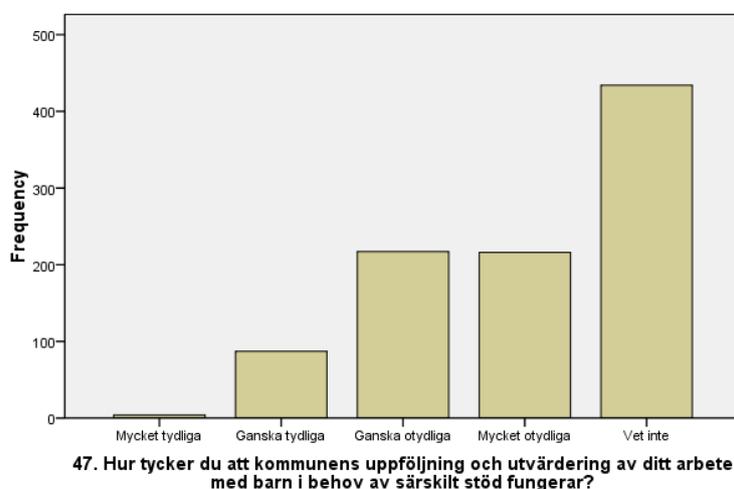


Figure 6: Do you think the evaluation of your work with children in special educational need, done by the municipality, is functional? (From the left; Very well, Rather well, Rather poorly, Very poorly, Don't know)

Table 1 presents how the participants in the study want to divide their time discussing different topics with their colleagues. More than six out of ten who answered the survey said that they wanted to discuss how the team interacts with children.

56.6 Vilka av följande aspekter vill du att ni diskuterar mer i ditt arbetslag? Hur vi möter barnen

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Hur vi möter barnen	623	63,4	100,0	100,0
Missing	99	36,6		
Total	983	100,0		

Table 1: Which one of the following aspects would you like to discuss more with your team? How we interact with children.

The pie chart in figure 7 illustrates the teachers', and other staff members', own perception of their ability to help children achieve their educational goals. The result shows that almost 70 % of the personnel believe that they have a very good, or rather good, ability to help children reach their educational goals. On the other hand, almost 30 % thought they had rather small, very small or no possibility at all to help children reach their educational goals.

16. Har du möjlighet att påverka barns måluppfyllelse?

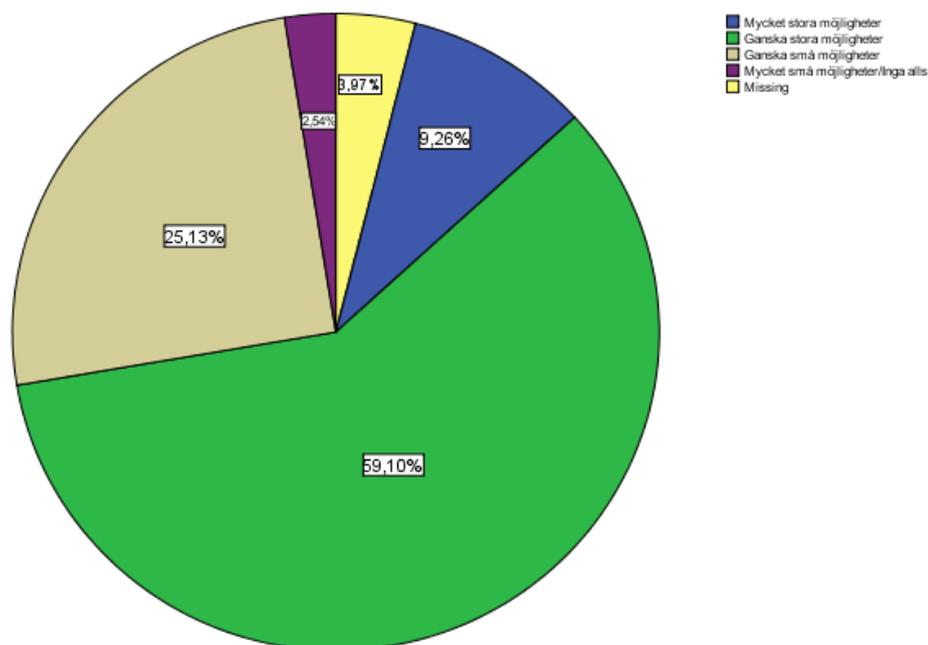


Figure 7: Do you have the possibility to help children achieve their educational goals? (From the top; Blue- Very good possibilities, Green- Rather good possibilities, Brown- Rather bad possibilities, Purple- Very bad possibilities/No possibilities at all, Yellow- Missing)

Figure 8 illustrates how much support children with special educational needs receive in school as perceived by the participants in this study. The question was addressed to children who have the right to special educational support according to Swedish law. 616 of the informants (approximately 62, 7 %) responded that just some, or just a few, children get such support.

18. Får de barn som har rätt till stöd enligt gällande lagstiftning sådant stöd?

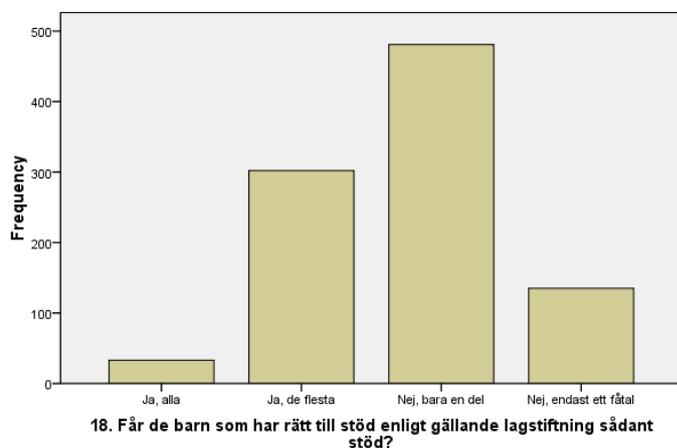


Figure 8: Do children, who are entitled to special support according to current law, get such support? (From the left; Yes, everyone, Yes, most of them, No, just some, No, just a few)

Discussion and conclusions

The ambition with this paper was to find some answers to the question: *How do teachers and personnel in preschools (age 1-5) and schools (grades 1-9) in a Swedish municipality consider their work with children in need of special educational support and their own special educational activities?*

Studying the current field of interest makes the researchers aware of the research question's complexity and the difficulties defining concepts like children in need of special educational support and special educational activity (Nilholm et al, 2007). The concepts can be hard to interpret for the participants answering the study as well as for decision-makers in municipalities and researchers. This survey, as well as the design of this study, was also one of the first of its kind in Sweden and the result needs further analysis to fully understand the outcome of the survey. The group asked was heterogeneous having different backgrounds, experiences, professions and educations. This has probably also affected the outcome of this study. Taking these aspects in consideration, the result can still give some indications of how the personnel in a Swedish municipality experiences and looks upon their work with children in need of special educational support.

The questionnaire reveals that almost two thirds of the participants believe that just some, or a few children, get the support they are entitled to. This is in line with other studies made in Sweden (Persson, 2001, Nilholm et al 2007, Skolverket, 2008).

The relatively high frequency (almost 30 %) of participants who thought they had rather small, very small or no possibilities at all of affecting children's ability to achieve their educational goals can be sighted as support for conclusions made in another report by The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2008). This national agency report states that there are not enough educated preschool teachers in Swedish preschools. Lack of education could be a reason that the participants in our study feel that their own skills are insufficient to help children in need of support. Ström (1999) mentions political, social and economical causes as important for schools' and municipalities' ability to develop and shape the educational sector. It might be that preschool and school personnel feel that they don't have the political support or the social and economical resources to help children reach all their educational goals. The result of this study shows that there is a continued difficulty for schools to meet the intentions of "A school for all" (Lgr 80) and all pupils' right to an equal education (Isaksson, 2009).

Most of the participants express that they have good support from their colleagues but less support from their headmasters. That might be an indication of an existing gap between the staff, who work directly with children in need, and the decision-makers of the schools. The gap, or imbalance (Persson, 1997) can also be seen between the personnel and the guidelines from the state and the municipality, which are meant to be the school staff's primary guiding principles. The survey results indicate that the personnel feel uncertain about what is required of them regarding their work with children in need of educational support on the basis of official guide lines and evaluations. This can also be an insight into the imbalances of needs, scarcities, goals, motives and actions between people and groups of people within and between different activity systems (Leontiev, 1986, Engeström, 1987).

This is a first comprehensive case study of a municipality in a larger research survey carried out in Sweden (Merriam, 1994). The study will also be a starting point of a larger project in the municipality studied. Other questions also asked in this study were: *How can the zone of proximal development in an activity system be made visible? And How can the work with children in need of special educational support in a municipality be developed?* In order to reach a deeper understanding of these questions the researchers need to work in many different fields and activity systems and also on

various levels and with a wide range of methods (Engeström, 1987, Ström 1999, Wetso 2006). It is possible to get a glimpse of imbalances and contradictions within and between activity systems through this study. The contradictions can be seen as tensions between subject, object, instrument, rules, community and division of labor (Engeström, 1987). This can be seen within and between people, groups of people and people in power. The prerequisite for observing the zone of proximal development in an activity system is that contradictions are made visible. Dilemmas (double binds) make it necessary to find new and different solutions to the experienced problem (Engeström, 1987). This is most likely to be done in a larger and deeper context. Ström (1999) shows in a previous study that the participants in a project need to experience these contradictions and have a strong will to change the circumstances in the activity system if the participants are to be able to see and understand the zone of proximal development in the activity system. This concerns also the developing of the work with children in need of special educational support in this particular case.

It is too early to say whether the two questions discussed above have been answered and further studies ought to be initiated such as qualitative studies which would include observations, interviews, diary-writing and close work with both adults and children in preschools and schools (Wetso, 2006).

School headmasters have an overall responsibility for managing how work with children in need of special educational support should be carried out. Thus headmasters can be seen to be in a position of power. Therefore it is interesting to investigate the relation between headmasters and their staff. These are some of the reasons the researchers carried out the second questionnaire mentioned in the beginning of this paper. The results of this follow-up study are not yet published.

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