Challenging traditions?

Pupils in need of special support in Swedish independent schools

Kerstin Göransson, Gunnlaugur Magnússon and Claes Nilholm

Swedish independent schools first emerged at the beginning of the 1990s and currently embrace about 12% of the pupils in the compulsory school system, that is from grade one until grade nine (pupils aged 7-16). The purpose of the present article is to provide a general analysis of the work being undertaken with pupils in need of special support in Swedish independent schools. The analysis is built on a survey of all independent schools in Sweden. The results show that the number of PNSS is lower in independent schools than in municipal schools and that a deficit perspective seems to be common regarding explanations for school problems.

There is, however, great diversity among the schools. The conclusions are that school choice as a challenge to the traditional way of conceiving education seems to be more effective for some other groups of pupils than for PNSS and that there are few signs that independent schools challenge traditions in work with PNSS.

Keywords: independent schools · pupils in need of special support · inclusion

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Points of departure

There has been no lack of attempts to theorize in research about special educational needs (Clark, Dyson & Millward, 1998). Further, several scholars have attempted to delineate the different theoretical positions available (e.g. Ainscow, 1998; Clark et al. 1998; Haug, 1998; Nilholm, 2006; Skrtic, 1991, 1995). Most analysts agree that there are at least two basic perspectives within the field (Nilholm, 2006). On the one hand, educational difficulties are primarily viewed as the result of individual shortcomings and segregated educational arrangements are mainly proposed as solutions. This approach is labelled somewhat differently by different scholars, for instance as a deficit approach (Ainscow, 1998) or as a compensatory view (Haug, 1998).

As pointed out by Clark et al. (1998), this orthodoxy has been heavily criticized and an alternative approach has emerged where social processes, rather than individual shortcomings, are viewed as lying «behind» (Skrtic, 1991) special educational needs. Within that approach, different candidates are proposed as causing the need for a special educational system; socioeconomic/structural inequalities, discourses, professional interests and/or the failure of mainstream education to adapt to children’s differences (cf. Clark et al. 1998). Moreover, inclusive education is proposed as an alternative to a separate special educational system (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) and special needs education is often discussed as a democratic issue (e.g Skrtic, 1995, Haug, 1998; cf. Nilholm, 2006).

Present investigation takes one of its points of departures in the latter perspective in emphasizing the need to critically examine special needs education from a social and democratic perspective. We also agree with Clark et al. (1998) that inclusion/special needs education involves several dilemmas that preclude any easy resolutions. From a democratic perspective, the rise of independent schools expresses a new way of looking at public (state) education.

Parents and pupils supposedly gain more power to influence schooling by being able to choose which school to go to. This has been described by Englund (1996) as a shift to an increasing influence of the «small democracy». Further, independent schools have been expected to challenge and stimulate municipal schools by providing alternatives to traditional educational practices (Proposition 1991/92:95; 1992/93:230; 1995/96:200; 2001/02:35). What does this new understanding of democracy with regard to schooling imply for special needs education?

The second point of departure of this study thus concerns the importance of paying attention to the context in which the study is carried out. Interestingly, both the practice of special education and the quest for more inclusive practices are at times understood as universal endeavours. Yet, special/inclusive education is always played out in particular socio-cultural settings (Slee, 2006a, b). Nilholm (2007) suggests that even research concerning special education/inclusion to a fairly large extent could be viewed as an outgrowth on national educational systems.

An illuminating survey on classification systems in special needs education (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008) points out obvious differences in understandings of special needs between different settings in time and place. Thus, we suggest that how pupils in need of special support are defined, educated and taken care of differs according to different times and places, and is dependent on the socio-cultural context (Säljö, 2000). A particular educational system can be viewed as an expression of a specific interpretation of democracy (cf. Held, 1997). In the Swedish context the concept of one school for all has
been closely linked to the development of the so-called «welfare state», within what is sometimes referred to as an egalitarian tradition (cf. Manzer, 2003).

Decisions about schooling have been made in the «large democracy» (Englund, 1996), i.e. the political context. Further, it was deemed important that children from different backgrounds and with different characteristics went to the same schools and classrooms. This was not a matter of choice, but something prescribed by political decisions. This point of departure implies that traditions specific to the Swedish setting will have an impact on how the independent schools approach their task. Because of this, it is important to provide a description of the Swedish educational system and the place of PNSS within it in order to understand this tradition. However, a focus on the Swedish school system should not preclude comparisons to other countries.

To sum up; we have presented two points of departure that, taken together, imply that we will undertake a contextually grounded critical investigation of the consequences regarding special needs education and of the challenges to public (state) education from the rise of independent schools in Sweden. Our overarching questions are: In what ways do independent schools challenge the Swedish tradition of special education? How does the notion of inclusive education relate to the practices of the independent schools?

The Swedish school system

The part of the Swedish educational system involved in this study is the comprehensive school within the compulsory school (age 7–16). The compulsory school encompasses the comprehensive school, the compulsory school for pupils diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, special schools and the Sami school. Over 98% of the pupils attend the comprehensive school. 1.4% of the pupils attend the school for pupils diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. This school form consists mainly of classes situated in comprehensive schools with varying degrees of cooperation taking place between the two school forms. The Sami school is designed to provide Sami children with schooling that has a Sami orientation and was, at the time of study, attended by 141 pupils (Skolverket, 2011).

There are five regional special schools for pupils who are deaf or hard of hearing and three national special schools, one for pupils who have impaired vision and additional disabilities, one for pupils who are deaf or hard of hearing in combination with an intellectual disability and pupils with congenital deafblindness, and one school for pupils with profound speech and communication disorders. All together, 500 pupils, attend these five special schools. These five special schools are run by the state. The other school forms within the compulsory school system are run either by the municipalities or by private stakeholders, i.e. independent schools.

The compulsory school is mandatory and free of charge. No admission fees are allowed, all school meals must be free, schools are not allowed to engage in activities that require the pupils (their parents) to pay anything and every school has to provide school healthcare free of charge, to give just a few examples. No other forms of schooling (for instance home schooling or private schools where tuition fees are required) are permitted within the Swedish school system. The Swedish Compulsory School System is governed primarily by the Education Act (SFS 1985:1100), the Compulsory School Ordinance (SFS 1994:1194), the Ordinance for Independent Schools (SFS 1996:1206), the curriculum for the compulsory school (Skolverket, 1994) and the national course syllabus for the compulsory school.
Schools and municipalities have an explicit responsibility to fulfill national goals. A national central agency, the Schools Inspectorate, undertakes supervision of all schools to ensure that they follow the laws and regulations. Licenses to operate independent schools may be withdrawn if they fail to address reprimands from the Schools Inspectorate. There are several goals concerning knowledge, social skills and democratic values which make it hard to be precise about the goal structure of the Swedish compulsory school (Göransson, Nilholm & Karlsson, 2010). In practice, the so-called knowledge goals of Swedish/Swedish as a second language, Math and English play important roles since they are decisive for eligibility to receive upper secondary education.

**Pupils in need of special support**

The concept *children in need of special support* is decisive in the Swedish comprehensive school. Need of support is related to the goal structure of the school system rather than to the notion of «disability». Thus, a medical diagnosis is not needed in order to be eligible for special support within the comprehensive school. Diagnoses are only necessary for entering the school for pupils with intellectual disabilities and for the special schools. Within the comprehensive school, failing in one or more of the three «core» subjects mentioned above (Göransson et al, 2010) is critical in order to be eligible for special support.

However, pupils regarded as having problems with concentration and/or relating to their peers, are often provided with special support (Skolverket, 2003). It is estimated that over 40% receive special support at least once during comprehensive school (Giota & Lundborg, 2007). By law the provision of special support in segregated groups is to be avoided according (SFS 1994:1194). Some pupils are nevertheless placed in such groups. Nilholm, Persson, Hjerm and Runesson (2007) make a very rough estimate that between 2.3% and 3.1% of pupils in the compulsory educational system receive their education in segregated settings in terms of a special school form or segregated groups where pupils spend more than 50% of their time.

**Independent schools in Sweden**

Until around twenty years ago a uniform school system with only public (state) schools was regarded as an important aspect of educational equality. The emergence of independent schools in the Swedish school system is probably best understood as a consequence of a wave of educational reforms on an international scale, running from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. In the early 1990s both left and right wing governments stressed freedom of choice within the educational sector as being a basic principle of national school organization in a «free society» (Proposition 95, 1991/92, p. 8).

Seen in an international perspective the Swedish educational reforms follow a similar pattern to the reforms in many other countries, where the concepts of decentralization, choice and privatization are the most prominent (Daun, 1996; Plank & Sykes, 2003; Walford, 2001). As Walford (2001) points out, these particular concepts can be seen either as examples of the effect of globalization, or as «policy borrowings», where concepts and policies occur in similar ways across several different countries. These concepts can also be seen as examples of how marketing rhetoric and economical rationality have become both legitimate and a norm within several fields, education being one, in the last decades of the 20th century (Daun, 1996; Arneback & Bergh, 2010).
The argument for school choice was thus perhaps the most important one regarding the Swedish independent schools and followed similar lines to the international ones. Advocates argued that competition for pupils in an educational market would increase the efficiency of schools and the quality of education. Additionally, some argued that it would be more democratic to allow children and parents to choose their education according to their own preferences.

Unlike, for example, the United States, independent schools, as a way of increasing freedom of choice, were rarely discussed in the Swedish context in terms of increasing equity within the educational system by offering the possibility of choice for socioeconomically disadvantaged families (cf. Nilsson, 2002; Wong & Shen, 2006). The discussion has rather concerned fears about the segregation consequences. However, independent schools and the municipal schools have similar legislative framework, such as the Education Act, the national values (Government Office, 1994), the national goals and the control systems, as well as similar economic conditions (Proposition 200, 1995/96; Proposition 35, 2001/02).

At the time of the present study, independent schools were to be found in 62% of the municipalities (Skolverket, 2009a). They are financed as voucher schools, i.e. they receive a fixed sum per pupil from the municipality, covering annual costs. The percentage of pupils attending independent schools had increased from 2% in 1995/96 to 10% in 2008/09 (Skolverket, 2009a) and was 12% in 2011. Teacher density is lower in independent schools compared to the public (state) schools and the percentage of teachers with a university education in pedagogy is lower. The merit rating (a composite measure of the grades of the pupils) of pupils in grade 9 is however higher in the independent schools.

Prior research

In a review of pupils with disabilities in American charter schools Rim and McLaughlin (2007, p. 11) conclude:

The available data about educating children with disabilities in the charter sector are relatively limited because of the scope and quantity of the research that has been conducted on the issue.

Another interesting finding reported is that there do not seem to be fewer children with disabilities in American charter schools than in the regular school system. Moreover, inclusive solutions seem to be more common in the charter schools (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). A study of Danish independent schools found more lower-performing pupils in Waldorf schools and smaller schools, which was interpreted as the clustering of children with special needs within these schools (Rangvid, 2008).

In a study published by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2003) the work being undertaken on intervention programs in the whole compulsory school system (including independent schools) was investigated. The schools have a legal obligation to write these programs when a child is eligible for additional support. Interesting differences between municipal and independent schools emerged in the study. For instance, the programs of the independent schools less frequently concerned problems with reading, writing and math, than the municipal schools’ programs. They were more often based on observations and less on tests. They scrutinized the teachers’ work and involved staff development more often. In addition, the independent schools much more frequently believed that the measures taken made them reach their goals and less support was provided by the independent schools. These results should be interpreted
with some caution in relation to today’s conditions since the data was collected in 2001 when independent schools were relatively new and few in the Swedish compulsory school system.

There is a large body of research addressing the work being undertaken with PNSS in Swedish municipal schools. When summarizing this research, Göransson et al. (2010) conclude that: (i) Swedish educational policy is not as inclusive as sometimes stated and it leaves a considerable room for interpretational possibilities at municipal and school level (cf. Ekström, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2007); (ii) «celebrating» difference seems hard to achieve; (iii) the goals of the system exclude pupils; (iv) many Swedish pupils seem to thrive in the school (Skolverket, 2007); and Swedish classrooms seem to be fairly democratic from an international perspective. Research also shows that a deficit perspective is firmly established in the Swedish school system (Persson, 1998), but that it is also, in some cases, challenged, at least in schools run by the municipalities (Nilholm et al. 2007).

**Purpose and Research Method**

This study has been conducted to obtain as comprehensive an image as possible of the independent schools’ work with PNSS. The total population was studied, which led to surveys being the most reasonable way of obtaining general and comprehensive information. The purpose of this article is to present the general situation of PNSS in independent schools. More specifically we are interested in (i) What is the percentage of pupils in need of special support? (ii) How are school problems explained? (iii) What is the occurrence of pupils being refused admittance to independent schools? and (iv) What forms of special support are provided? The results will be discussed in relation to traditional special educational practices versus the potential challenge of these; and to the notion of inclusive education.

**Data collection and analysis**

*Questionnaire:* The questions analyzed in the present article were part of a larger questionnaire with 36 questions (150 if all sub-questions and categorizations are included) concerning independent schools’ work with pupils in need of special support. The questionnaire was designed in order to cover several aspects of the independent schools’ work with PNSS. An initial version of the questionnaire was tested in early spring 2009 when four head teachers of independent schools were given the questionnaire for review. Only minor changes needed to be made to the questionnaire.

*Procedure:* The survey was sent out to all registered independent schools in Sweden (in total 686) during spring 2009. The surveys were addressed to the head teachers who were accountable for the schools as well as legally responsible for the work done with pupils in need of special support. A letter explaining the study was sent with the surveys and this specified the responsibilities of the head teachers in respect of responding to the surveys. The respondents were allowed to obtain assistance from other staff members. In some cases this led to delegation of the tasks involved, usually to those in charge of special educational work and organisation within the school. Three reminders were sent to the participants as time passed. The second reminder contained a new questionnaire in case the participant had lost the first one. In June 2009 a list of 200 schools that had still not sent in answers was drawn up and three members of the team made phone calls to each school whose answers were missing in order to increase the response rate. In the end answers were received from 546 schools (79.5%).
Data analysis and presentation: The responses to each question will be presented in terms of dichotomies even though several response alternatives were provided in the questionnaire (for example the response alternatives 1 = very uncommon, 2 = rather uncommon, 3 = rather common, 4 = very common, were dichotomized into common/uncommon). Secondly, only schools who took a stand on a particular question will be accounted for. Thus, schools who did not answer a particular question or who used the response alternative «no opinion» when this was available are left out of the analysis. The schools that left out responses on particular questions or used the «no opinion» alternative rarely exceeded 10%.

In order to diminish the potential effects of non-response to the survey, weights were constructed based on school size, the geographical location of the municipality, the percentage of pupils born abroad and the percentage of pupils with parents with low levels of education (primary or less). These weights were used to calibrate the answers for generalizations relating to the whole population of independent schools, i.e. all compulsory schools run by private parties and licensed by the school authorities as such. Since the objective of this particular article is to present the general situation of pupils in need of special support in independent schools, only descriptive statistics are used in the presentation of the data.

Results

Before turning to the outcome of the analysis pertaining to the specific questions we will present some background data collected from the questionnaire in order to contextualize the empirical findings. Thus, we will provide information regarding the overall orientation, the profiles of independent schools and the size of the schools.

Background data

Overall orientation: When applying for remittances for starting a school an orientation must be specified that is supposed to permeate the school and the school’s work. The results show that almost 80% have a general orientation. Principally schools can choose between a confessional orientation (5.7%) or a Waldorf orientation (8.3%), or belong to a side sphere of international schools (2.7%). Those schools that do not follow one of these orientations simply fall under the category of general orientation.

Profiles: Independent schools can choose to specify their work in different ways by using different profiles. About 68% of the independent schools have such profiles. The most common profile (about ¼ of the schools) is a specific pedagogical method. Regarding other types of profiles there are less than 10% of each profile, for example, specific topics, a specific ethnic profile or religious orientation. However, of particular interest is the fact that 10.7% of the schools specify aspects of special education, such as special support or a specific diagnosis, as their profile.

The size of schools: Most of the independent schools are relatively small. At the time of the study, the independent schools constituted about 14% of Sweden’s total school population, but had around 10% of the pupils enrolled (Skolverket, 2009a). As can be seen in Figure 1, 50% of the schools have less than 100 pupils, and 72% have less than 200 pupils. On the other hand, the independent schools vary greatly in size, from very few pupils (10 or fewer) to the largest number of 906 pupils.
Summing up the background data, we can conclude that the majority of the independent schools have a general orientation; the most common profile is a specific pedagogical method. 10.7% of the schools have special support as their profile. Most of the schools are quite small. However, there are considerable variations regarding size.

**Analysis of the research questions**

The data relevant to the research questions will be presented in turn. The analysis of each research question is concluded with a short discussion of the findings where comparisons to data from municipal schools are made.

**What is the percentage of pupils in need of special support?**

Three measures were obtained and the outcome is presented in Table 1. Table 1 shows the percentage of PNSS, the percentage of pupils who receive special support, the percentage of pupils who have intervention plans.

As can be seen in Table 1 the percentage of pupils receiving special support is 11.8%. The percentage of pupils being judged as being in need of special support is slightly higher.

Table 2 shows the percentage of pupils receiving and being in need of special support in relation to the school grades encompassed by the schools. The results show that the percentage of pupils receiving and being in need of special support is quite stable over the schools’ grades.

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<tr>
<td>Pupils IN NEED OF special support</td>
<td>13.5 %</td>
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<td>Pupils who RECEIVE special support</td>
<td>12.2 %</td>
<td>11.5 %</td>
<td>10.5 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pupils that HAVE intervention plans</td>
<td>13 %</td>
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Table 3 shows how the percentage of pupils receiving special support is distributed between the schools. As can be seen there are considerable variations between the schools. The percentage of PNSS varies from 0% (13 schools claim to have none) to 100%, where 68.5% of the schools have less than 20% of their PNSS and approximately 10% of the schools have 90–100%. The schools that have such high percentages tend to be very small in relation to the other schools (many have fewer than 10 pupils).

A comparison with municipal schools, suggests that the number of pupils receiving as well as being deemed being to be in need of special support is lower in independent schools. According to a study by Nilholm et al. (2007), the percentages in schools run by the municipalities are 15.4% and 16.9% respectively. A study by Persson (2003), including both independent and municipal schools, suggests slightly higher percentages, 17% and 21% respectively. Giota and Emanualsson (2011) report 19 and 19.9% for the municipal schools and 15.6 and 16.3% for independent schools (classes 1-3 and 7-9 respectively).

The trend whereby special support is more usual in earlier school grades in schools run by municipalities reported by Giota and Lundberg (2007) and Persson (2003) is not as evident in the independent schools where the number of pupils receiving special support is quite stable, although decreasing, over the school grades. As in the study by Persson (2003), the number of pupils in need of special support as well as receiving special support is higher in smaller schools. In schools with 100 pupils or less the percentages are 17.6% and 19% respectively and in schools with more than 400 pupils the equivalent percentages are 9% and 9.6% respectively.

How are school problems explained?
The suggested reasons for pupils being in need of special support were analyzed, as was the importance attached to diagnoses in respect of obtaining special support, in order to understand how the independent schools explain school problems. As can be seen in Figure 2, several different reasons were presented.
The reason for school problems most often stated as being common is pupils’ individual deficits, with 81.3% marking that alternative. The second most commonly stated explanations (reaching approximately 60% each) are that the pupils’ home environments are defective and the school’s goals are too high. These results are in line with Giota and Emanuelsson (2011), although the numbers vary significantly, probably due to the sampling and phrasing of alternatives. Reasons of an organizational character are mentioned less frequently; the school being poorly adapted for coping with diversity reaches up to 45% and teachers are only considered a possible explanation in 30% of the cases, whereas the classes come up to 35%.

The importance of diagnosis for receiving special support was explored by two questions in the questionnaire. The outcomes of both questions are depicted in Figure 3.
As can be seen, diagnosis is stated quite commonly as being of high importance in order for pupils to receive special support, with 70.5% of the schools marking either that it is of high or rather high importance. This is similar to Giota and Emanuelsson’s (2011) results. In addition to this, 44.2% of the schools state that diagnosis should play an important role. On the other hand, slightly more than half of the schools (55.8%) state that diagnosis should not be important in order to receive special support.

To summarize, the most common explanations for pupils being in need of special support are connected to the individual pupil and factors outside the school (i.e. factors the school cannot influence). A majority also claims that diagnosis is important for receiving special support. However, slightly more than half of the schools state that it should not be important and slightly less than half of the schools also state one or several reasons connected to the organization and functioning of the school itself.

There is no comparable data on school levels regarding schools run by municipalities. Although similar questions were included, the survey conducted by Nilholm et al. (2007) was on a municipal level and comparison must therefore be made with caution. Results from the municipal survey suggest that a similar attitude to reasons for being in need of special support exists in municipal school organizations, with a focus on individual deficits and factors outside the particular school.

On the other hand, there is a greater tendency to challenge this deficit perspective in the municipalities. A higher percentage considers poor adaption of the schools for coping with diversity, teacher ability or the functioning of classes as being common or very common reasons for pupils being in need of special support (Nilholm et al. 2007). Regarding the importance of diagnosis for receiving special support, the results are almost the reverse in the municipal survey. A majority of the municipalities, 62.6%, state that diagnosis is of low or rather low importance, as compared to 70.5% of the independent schools who state that diagnosis is of high or very high importance. Furthermore, 44.2% do not challenge this, but state that diagnosis should play an important role.

What is the occurrence of refusal of admittance?
The independent schools have had the right to refuse to accept PNSS in certain cases, for reasons such as that admitting the pupil in question would cause the school great organizational or economic difficulties. 9.8% answered that they had refused admittance to pupils because the municipality had not supplied sufficient funds and 11.7% did so because it would cause the school great organizational or economic difficulties. These questions are not mutually exclusive, so calculations were made to control overlaps and to obtain a better picture of the combined effects. Overall 15.2% of the schools have at some point over the last 3 years refused admittance to pupils for either reason, or both. This can be related to the fact that almost 38% of the schools claim that the support they receive from the municipalities is not equivalent to what the municipal schools receive.

What forms of provision for educational support are provided?
School can provide educational support in different forms. Figure 4 displays how common different forms are and the forms that are considered desirable.
The results show that there is no form of special support that could be said to be typical or characteristic of independent schools. Most forms of support are common or very common in around 50–60% of the schools, which means that these forms of support are not common in the remaining 40–50%. Forms of support, where the pupil(s) leave the class during part of the week, either to be taught in a smaller group or to receive individual teaching, is common in slightly more than 50% and 60% of the schools respectively.

Support given in the ordinary class in terms of categories such as guidance by a special pedagogue, an additional teacher in class or an assistant in the classroom are all common in around 50–60% of the schools. Interestingly 24.2% of the schools state that they do not have people with either special pedagogical or special teacher education among the staff involved in providing special support. The adaptation of class size is common in slightly less than 40% of the schools.

The spread regarding what are considered to be desirable solutions is somewhat different. Around ¾ of the schools consider it desirable that special support is given in the ordinary class in the form of guidance provided by a special pedagogue and to adapt class size. A similar number of schools consider individual teaching as being desirable. It is worth noting is that a greater number of schools state «special groups more than 50% of the time» as being desirable than the number actually practicing this as a common or very common form of special support.

Even though it is a minority that considers this a desirable solution, the results show that it is slightly more than 20%. In the case of special support in the form of special groups where pupils spend more than 50% of their school time, the results show that this is practiced (albeit not a common solution) in 15.8% of the schools. As can be seen in Figure 5 many of these groups are oriented around certain diagnoses or problems. The most common orientation is ADHD/DAMP and 13% of the schools have groups with this orientation. 11% of the schools have groups oriented around psychosocial problems.
The results show that there is great diversity among independent schools with regards to the forms of special support that are commonly used. There is little comparable data on school levels regarding schools run by municipalities, for instance, the survey conducted by Nilholm et al. (2007) is on municipal level. This makes comparison difficult, not least regarding the forms of support that are commonly used as those data encompass all the schools run by a municipality.

Despite this, a comparison regarding the solutions that are considered desirable shows some interesting similarities. The solution considered to be desirable by most independent schools as well as by most municipalities is that the pupil should be part of the regular class and receive guidance from a special pedagogue (75% and 95% respectively). Giota and Emanuelsson’s (2011) comparative study of municipal and independent schools presents numbers that vary significantly from these results, but the results are along the same lines as those presented here. The variations might be explained by the sampling and phrasing of alternatives. However, 24.2% of the independent schools have no special pedagogues or special teachers involved in providing special support.

According to statistics supplied by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SIRIS, 2010), the percentage of staff with a university education in special education is much lower in the independent schools than the municipal schools, or 3.0% compared to the municipal schools’ 6.7%. To have an additional teacher in the classroom is another form of special support that the majority of the independent schools as well as the municipalities consider to be desirable, 75% and 79% respectively.

There are also some interesting differences. Only 10% of the municipalities consider special groups where pupils spend more than 50% of their time to be a desirable solution, while a little over 20% state it as being a
common solution (Nilholm et al. 2007). Among the independent schools, over 20% of the schools state this as being a desirable solution, whereas 15% state it as being a common form of special support. There is also a considerable difference between the considered desirability of having an assistant in the classroom. A minority of the municipalities (29%) favor this as being a desirable solution. Among the independent schools a majority, over 60%, consider this to be a desirable solution.

Discussion

The results show that the number of pupils receiving as well as being judged as being in need of special support in independent schools is estimated at 11.8% and 13% respectively. A pattern that emerges displays an even distribution over the school grades, but with a higher occurrence in smaller schools. Regarding the explanation of school problems, a deficit perspective seems to be prevalent among the respondents. A third general pattern that emerges is the diversity between the schools. This diversity concerns both the schools’ size and the number of pupils in need of special support as well as explanation of the schools’ problems and actual, as well as desirable, forms of provision of special support. In the remaining part we will discuss the results in relation to traditional special educational practices versus the potential challenge of these, and the notion of inclusive education.

As mentioned earlier the argument for school choice was very important regarding the rise of independent schools in Sweden. This notion of school choice can be seen as a challenge to the tradition that decisions about schooling are made in a political context, or what Englund (1996) refers to as the «large democracy». However, the lower number of pupils in need of special support in independent schools indicates that the freedom of choice might be limited compared to pupils who are not in need of special support.

The data also shows that as many as 15% of the schools state that they have had to refuse students in need of special support within the last three years on account of not being able to obtain sufficient subsidies from the municipality. Almost 38% of the schools also state that the support they receive from the municipality regarding pupils in need of special support is not equivalent to the support the municipal schools receive. The fact that there are fewer children in need of special support within the independent schools is also compatible with the fact that parents with an education beyond upper secondary school level to a greater extent choose independent schools (National Board of Education, 1996; Lidström, 1999).

Since pupils with parents with a lower education are overrepresented among pupils in need of special support (Giota & Lundborg, 2007) a lower number of children in need of special support in the independent schools can be expected. There are two competing explanations for this state of affairs. On the one hand, people with a higher education choose independent schools to a higher degree. On the other hand, independent schools are to a higher degree established in areas where people have a higher level of education. Studies (Skolverket, 2005) suggest that independent schools have contributed to an increase in the tendency for pupils with parents with a higher level of education to end up in the same schools in the Swedish school system.

Further, increased segregation in the Swedish housing sector implies that people with a higher education residing in the same areas might be greater contributors than the independent schools themselves to the fact that the schools also are becoming more so-
cially segregated (Lindbom & Almgren, 2007). However, the fact that 15% of the schools have refused admittance to PNSS together with the lower number of PNSS in independent schools suggests a limited choice and influence for parents and PNSS. This suggests that independent schools do not represent the intended challenge of the education system as regards freedom of choice for parents and PNSS. Instead it indicates increased segregation within the education system on the structural level, with municipal schools having a higher number of PNSS than independent schools and consequently representing a possible threat to the equality of the education system.

As regards the notion of independent schools and how this is related to inclusive education, one has to be hesitant about drawing too far reaching conclusions since the data derive from different levels when comparing independent schools and schools in municipalities. Perhaps more interesting is the comparison so the results presented in this article with the normative characteristics of inclusive education (Skrtic, 1991, 1995; Haug, 1998, 1999). Haug (1998) among others (cf. Göransson et al. 2010) suggests that in inclusive education pupils should not be labeled negatively or receive education in segregated settings.

It is evident from the data that school problems are to a large extent explained in terms of individual shortcomings and/or deficits in home environments, and that more or less segregated forms of provision are common and desired. A comparison with head teachers in independent schools and municipal schools also shows that head teachers in independent schools deem it to be far more important to have a medical diagnosis (Nilholm, Almqvist, Göransson & Lindqvist, 2012).

One explanation for this could be that independent schools need a diagnosis when requesting resources to a greater extent than schools run by the municipalities, although it is not known if this is the case. Regardless of the explanation it emphasizes the deficit perspective. The same data also show that head teachers in independent schools also believe that diagnosis should be very or rather important to a greater extent than head teachers in schools run by the municipalities. Almost ¼ of the schools do not have teachers with special pedagogical or special teacher education among the staff involved in the provision of special support, and the percentage of staff with a university education in special needs education is much lower than in schools run by the municipalities.

Regardless of the fact that we lack precise comparison data from the municipal school system on some accounts, the outcome of the study adds up to a whole body of evidence that the deficit perspective is still very influential and that it is questionable as to whether or not the rhetoric of inclusive education has made schools more inclusive (cf. McLeskey & Waldron, 2007). Another general pattern that emerged was the great diversity between the schools. This might suggest a move to a more segregated education system with some schools having a very high percentage of PNSS, while others have a very low percentage or no PNSS.

On the other hand, within such a diverse field one may find alternatives to traditional educational practices that foster more inclusive practices. Earlier findings (Skolverket, 2003) concerning the intervention programs of the independent schools, suggested that these related to problems with reading, writing and math much less often, and were also more seldom based on tests and more often on observations, than intervention programs in schools run by the municipalities. Perhaps more important from an ideological point of view, intervention programs in independent schools scrutinized teachers’ work and in-
volved staff development more often. In addition, the independent schools much more frequently believed that the measures undertaken made them reach their goals and less support was provided by the independent schools.

Taken together this seems to challenge the tradition. However, we would be hesitant to draw such a conclusion since quite severe methodological problems are involved. In the study conducted by Skolverket (2003) independent schools were compared to municipal schools in general at a time when independent schools were a relatively new phenomenon, as well as a much smaller part of the Swedish educational system. In addition, there are several characteristics that make independent schools different from municipal ones; for instance, they are generally smaller and the parents generally have a higher educational level. These factors were not controlled.

This article describes the results from only a few of the several very interesting questions dealt with in this study. Further investigations into the variations within the group will be the next logical step, as the independent schools clearly vary greatly, both in regards to size and location, as well as practical work and the definitions of their work. Further comparisons with the municipal schools in Sweden and perhaps other school systems are also of interest. The implications of this manner of providing educational choice are quite unique and can be supposed to have a great impact on several levels of the system.

Furthermore it would be interesting to delve into the more democratic and inclusive aspects of the independent schools, both regarding issues such as influence over the work being undertaken with children in need of special support as well as regarding the legislative and regulative control of the schools’ work. This could be tackled at a philosophical level as well, where the idea of independent schools as an intervention for democracy can be analyzed. Finally, this survey study is part of a broader research project in which visits to certain schools as well as observations and interviews will be conducted and where the independent schools’ work will be studied further.

Notes

1 A new Education Act as well as a revised national curriculum and national course syllabuses were launched in 2011. However, what we want to show here is that Swedish compulsory schools are to a great extent governed by national regulations (SFS, 2010:800).

2 In the new Education Act instead of three subjects there will be 12 or 8 subjects that will be decisive for eligibility for upper secondary education depending on the type of upper secondary education (SFS, 2010:800).

3 P stands for «preschool class» which is a preparatory year open to all six year olds. It should bridge the gap between the preschool environment and activities and the school environment and activities and about 96% of all six year olds are registered in preschool class (Skolverket 2011).

Literature


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