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### Raising achievement through inclusion

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## Raising achievement through inclusion

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In 2007, Swedish authorities introduced open publication of comparisons of students' results at the end of compulsory school. In this study, we investigated a municipality that had succeeded in breaking a negative trend from a bottom position in the ranking in 2007 to a top position in 2010, apparently through inclusive practices. The purpose of this study is to examine and isolate key elements that make a difference in schools and classrooms in the work with all students. Data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. Mary Douglas' cultural–cognitive perspective of institutional theory and the work of Ludwik Fleck are used to identify and analyse factors of importance to the increased goal fulfilment. The school's decision to end all segregated small group activities and to include all children in the normal classroom activity is examined. Moreover, the emphasis on teachers' reading and discussing of national and international research and focusing on all children's right to succeed in the classroom is analysed. The analysis suggests that focusing on goal fulfilment through inclusion gave a wider definition to the concept of successful schooling and changed the traditional thought style of the school.

**Keywords:** inclusion; goal fulfilment; successful schools; teacher work

### Introduction

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the media image of Swedish schools today is bleak. Results from the national statistics show that the proportion of pupils who are unable to leave elementary schools with pass grades has increased and the proportion of pupils eligible for secondary schools has been the lowest in over a decade. Nearly one in five students do not pass the subject test in mathematics in grade 9, which has doubled in 7 years. As if this were not enough, Swedish students fall behind in international knowledge rankings, most recently in the 2009 PISA study.

In this study, the focus was on a Swedish municipality that had succeeded in converting a negative trend into success. This success has been so exceptional that in 2011 thousands of visitors came to this municipality from all over Sweden. Reports in newspapers, television, magazines and online have had such a strong impact that the municipality could not accommodate all who wanted to learn from this success. All wanted to take advantage of this good example for tips on how to improve their own operations.

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The empirical data that form the basis for this article were collected from September 2010 to June 2011, and the aim of this study was to identify and analyse factors relevant to the increased effectiveness. In this article, the focus is on the core concepts of effectiveness and inclusion.

## **Background**

In Sweden, the municipality has the responsibility for all schools (with the exception of independent schools), but in recent years, its autonomy has become increasingly limited. The new Education Act and the 2011 curriculum are far more detailed than the former ones, although the government has increased monitoring. In conjunction with the curriculum of the compulsory school system, introduced in 1994 in Sweden, a new system for assessing students' knowledge was established. Stated goals of achieving the level of knowledge in the different subjects that students should be able to cope with were given. These target levels formed the basis for the grading criteria for a pass in grade 9. School results are aggregated to the school and municipality, and comparative figures are then used for quality assessment, ranking and reward. The municipality studied here has, through focused efforts, managed to reach almost all the school's goals. Even though the entire municipality has been involved in the change process, the data presented in this article were collected in one school with about 300 students in grades 6–9.

### ***From integration to inclusion***

There is much literature in which notions of 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education' are central, while there is no consensus on what inclusion is and is not about (see, for example, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Farrell et al. 2007; Lindsay 2007; Slee 2011). Inclusive schools are expected to give all students stimulation and encouragement where the goals are meaningful participation and a sense of togetherness. Inclusion is not primarily a matter of physical location, but that about our well-considered intentions for a better society (Bangs, MacBeath, and Galton 2011; Barton 1997). In the view of many people, such a definition seems utopian and its practical implementation difficult to evaluate. In a school system where measurement, ranking and competition have a prominent place, the school's wider aims and ambitions are difficult to enforce.

Allan (2010) writes about the problems that the quest for inclusion in Europe has faced since 2000. She notes that large-scale and optimistic inclusion projects in countries such as Germany, Holland and Austria have been less successful and argues

Schools have been given additional resources, in the hope that they will develop 'good practice' that can be transferred to other schools. Not surprisingly, they observe, other schools are reluctant to accept the additional responsibilities without the same level of resources. (202–3)

The conclusion of these projects is that if politicians and other decision-makers are to have any success in the efforts to create more inclusive learning environments, they should '... avoid such experimental approaches and, importantly "back off", leaving schools to develop their own inclusive practices' (203).

Results from Allan's own research also show that teachers and headmasters are positive towards inclusion as a principle, but teachers particularly feel that they have inadequate skills for its implementation. Students in her research, however, could not see any logic in the division of students into different groups. They saw the barriers of schools' physical environment and the structures and attitudes, but most surprisingly, the behaviour and attitudes of the adults, as limiting participation for all students.

The Swedish Education Act clearly states that the Swedish school system should be accessible to all. Likewise, the legislation specifies that when there is a need for additional support, it should be available in the regular class:

Special support should be given to students who need special education. Such support will primarily be in the class or group to which the pupil belongs. If there are special reasons, such assistance can be given in a particular teaching group. Only after consultation with the student and the student's guardian, decisions about student placement in a special education group are taken. (SFS 2000:1108)

Inclusion as a principle is thus rooted in the Swedish school legislation, even if the concept of inclusion is not mentioned explicitly. Tradition since the early 1960s has meant that the mainstream school is not questioned. However, such a taking for granted can be deceptive because the basic idea of inclusion is not subject to public debate. The fact that we in Sweden for 50 years have had a cohesive, compulsory school system may have caused us to assume this condition to be so obvious that the issue need not be discussed.

### ***Successful schools and inclusion***

Much has been written about schools that do well. In the majority of articles about 'Successful Schools', leadership issues are highlighted, while texts with a pedagogical perspective are more rare. Few studies are found where processes in the educational environment in relation to outcomes have been studied. A key question is what characterises a school where staff work with an inclusive perspective and where the results are good not only in terms of performance but also when it comes to students' and teachers' social interaction, enjoyment and experience of meaningfulness (Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Farrell et al. 2007).

### ***Differentiation of different forms***

One common strategy for raising achievement in schools is differentiation of the students in the form of ability grouping. Many teachers support ability grouping because they think that it is easier to adapt teaching to the needs of different students in small groups. It is believed that in this way they can provide additional support for such pupils at risk of not achieving pass grades and thus gain entry into the desired high school programmes. Some larger efficacy studies of this kind of organisational differentiation have not been conducted in Sweden in recent years, perhaps mainly for the reason that the Education Act does not allow for such solutions.

Boaler, William, and Brown (2005) reported results from a so-called probability grouping in mathematics at six schools, three with a traditional approach to teaching and three with a progressive one. The schools had comprehensive mathematics teaching programmes through grade 8, that is, at 11 years old. One school introduced

‘setted-ability groups’ at the age of 12 years, three schools were waiting for another year and two continued with ‘mixed-ability groups’. The authors write

When students moved from year 8 to 9 in our study, it became clear from questionnaire, lesson observation and interview data that many students in the setted schools began to face negative repercussions as a result of the change from mixed-ability to setted teaching. 40 of the 48 students interviewed from setted groups wanted either to return to mixed-ability teaching or to change sets. (44)

Boaler, William, and Brown’s study shows that the anticipation effects are of great importance not only for how students perceive themselves but also – and perhaps even worse – for teachers’ high and low expectations which are reinforced in their teaching.

A study by Oakes (1985) showed that the organisational differentiation, as it was then reflected in the US high-track and low-track classes, affected students’ self-perception. Pupils in the positively differentiated classes (high-track) were more positive about their educational experiences than students in the negatively differentiated classes (low-track). Oakes reported a strengthening of the self-perception of the students who were able to move in positively differentiated classes during their school hours, while the reverse pattern was true for the pupils who went into negatively differentiated classes.

Slavin (1991), reviewing international research over 30 years, writes

Despite the wide spread use of between-class ability grouping, and despite evidence that teachers overwhelmingly believe in its necessity and effectiveness ... research on this strategy does not support its use. Researchers have found that while ability grouping may have slight benefits for students assigned to high-track classes, these benefits are balanced by slight losses for students assigned to low-track classes. (283)

Swedish and international research has thus concluded that ability grouping or organisational differentiation of different kinds does not provide the benefits that teachers intuitively imagine. Research within this field also had a significant influence on policy. In a publication by the OECD (2012), countries are advised to avoid system-level policies conducive to school and student failure such as selection and early tracking. A study by Teach First (2009) also highlighted the benefits of mixed-ability teaching for students.

Individualisation in the form of individual work has become increasingly common in Swedish schools in recent years. It seems tempting to see the individual work as the consummate pedagogical differentiation. Such a conclusion, however, requires a critical examination. What is lost if students hour after hour alone engage in tasks that they solve for themselves and in silence are the collective conversation and social interaction. The teacher’s role has been reduced to administration; it is concerned with providing students with information (which might be different) and providing feedback. But perhaps even worse is that the teacher’s role as the authoritative adult with a store of knowledge to share is lost.

Pedagogical differentiation and individualisation should therefore be understood as something much more than a question of working methods and prioritisation of content. The fact that the teacher provides students with information at a level deemed appropriate by the students’ potential for learning is no guarantee that the learning goals are reached.

### Data collection

In this study, data were collected through qualitative interviews with politicians, managers, headmasters, special educators, teachers, pupils, parents and other staff within the municipality's school activities. Participant observation was carried out in classes and meetings of various kinds, relevant for the purpose of the study. Informal discussions with students and staff were also carried out. Written documentation, booklets and other materials developed during the years of change were analysed. These included access to a logbook completed by a special education teacher since 2007. The duration of interviews varied between 40 and 80 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word by word. The collection of data using different methods made it possible to compare key concepts used in the interviews, in informal talk and in the literature and materials. It was also possible to compare concepts, categorisations and classification systems used by different informants.

### Institution theory in educational context

The empirical data were analysed using an institutional theoretical framework. Schools as institutions are constantly under pressure of change at the same time as their stability rests on strong traditions. Schools create frameworks for the individuals working within them. Concepts and classifications in use within the institutions are taken for granted after a while and are reflected in the daily activity by individuals. This theoretical framework offers tools to analyse how and why staff and pupils, parents and other people involved in this study succeeded in changing their approach to school during a rather short time.

A uniform and specific definition of the concept institution is difficult to find in the research literature. Sociologist and institutional theorist Scott (2008) provides, however, a general explanation of the term. Scott describes institutions as multifaceted and distinctive with sustainable social structures and containing social activities and material resources:

Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life. (48)

Institutions may be formed for a number of reasons, but history and tradition are common factors. Scott emphasises the institution's resilience and its conservation skills from generation to generation. Anthropologist Douglas (1986) shows how institutions are constituted and maintained by common concepts, categorisation and classification systems. These are expressed through the language used by different thought collectives within the institution and determined by the prevailing thought style. The cognitive dimension is of importance, and symbols such as words, signs and gestures stand out as essential when individuals create meaning by objects and activities. Routines and rules are taken for granted. The concepts of collective thought and thought style are taken by Douglas from Fleck's (1997) theory of the emergence of a 'scientific fact'.

### Key concepts

A few key terms are explained here as they have a key role in the analysis of the data. A *thought style* is a comprehensive and governing network that helps us to perceive,

understand and think about the world. It is socially and historically dependent while constantly changing. According to Douglas, the institutional thought style systematically penetrates individual consciousness and directs individual memory and perceptions into forms compatible with the relations authorised by the institutions. A *thought collective* consists of people who are carriers of a particular thought style, and they can be of two kinds: momentary or stable. For any given style, there is an inner esoteric circle, and this is where the real view is given its recharge. This is where discussions take place, arrangements are made, and conflicts and disagreements that lead to the development of thought styles are portrayed. An exoteric circle surrounds the esoteric circle. The members of this must rely on the experts in the inner circle. A democratic structure within the given style leads to the members of the esoteric circle listening to and taking impressions from the members of the exoteric circle. It is in the inner esoteric circle that thought formation takes place. Discussions, agreement and disagreement develop the thought style. This means that most of the members of the thought collective have to depend upon the initiated members, and this is how Fleck explains the slow progress of the thought style. The members of the exoteric circle are conscious of the passive components, history and cognitive anchorage of the thought style. Their own activity is obvious, socialised through education, training and discussions within the thought collective (Fleck 1997, 104–6).

As the institution creates its classifications, the individuals partly lose their independence. The social classifications create phenomena constituting the framework through which the phenomena are evaluated and judged. A phenomenon can, for example, be found to be successful, acceptable or deviant. Socially accepted classifications are preserved and expressed in the institution and informally accepted beliefs influence the individual as to the kind of behaviour expected. Consequently, the individual looks upon herself in the same way that she understands other people, the society at large and authorised persons within the institution to look upon her (Douglas 1986, 101).

Institutions such as schools create frameworks for the individuals operating within them. Concepts and classification systems are specific to the institutions and are gradually taken for granted while they are reflected in individuals' actions. This means that when decisions are taken, it can be done on the basis of both rational calculations and/or irrational premises. These are then developed into routines and taken-for-granted patterns that are followed without the individual to any great extent reflecting on why it is so or on the consequences of actions. Individual choice is also governed by normative rules and is embedded in networks of shared social demands and obligations (Scott 2008, 68–9).

## Results

Through the changes made such as abandonment of groupings and a research-based approach, whereby staff read and reflected upon research reported in the literature, the municipality studied managed to break a negative trend. What makes this case so interesting is the fruitful combination of focus on knowledge and values and how this can be expressed on the basis of an inclusive perspective. The analysis of the empirical material shows that this combination led to knowledge developing a much broader meaning than its usual instrumental meaning within Swedish policy and legislation. What is also interesting are the joint vocabulary, explanations and key concepts used by all informants.

Efforts in the municipality began in 2007, when open comparisons between schools in Sweden's municipalities were presented for the first time. Only 76% of the students were eligible for upper secondary national programmes. Three years later, there were only three grades that were not approved: two in social studies and one in sports. All the students were eligible for upper secondary national programmes. In 2011, the number was 97% when compared with the national average of 87%. In 2011, the national test results for ninth grade in mathematics, Swedish and English were better than ever (see Table 1). Only two pupils left school without upper secondary qualifications and the proportion of pupils who had pass grades in all subjects was 89%.

However, it is not the goal of achievement in itself that is most interesting, but the research-based approach that was followed. The starting point was to give all students the opportunity to succeed in their regular classes by inclusive education. Ability grouping and special education groups, common in Swedish schools, were abandoned. This was supported by research showing that heterogeneous classes benefit students both socially and in terms of results (National Agency for School Inspection 2010; Persson 2007). In the academic year 2006–2007, about 20% of students in grades 6–9 had been placed in special education groups and other segregated support units. These students were sent back to their classes in 2007, and the special education resource was added to the regular classes, which meant that they could double the teacher resource in classes. This development took place within the existing budget.

### *An untenable situation*

Special education teachers and special teachers who worked with and had the main responsibility for the students who were judged to have special educational needs had already discussed the problematic situation of the school in 2006. More and more students were placed in the separate groups and thereby alienated from their regular classes. The reason that a student was transferred varied. Commonly, however, regular class teachers felt that the students could not keep up with the pace or absorb the contents of the teacher's lesson. Special education teachers responsible for teaching small groups argued that the needs of these groups that emerged were so diverse that it eventually became an impossible situation:

In almost every group, there was of course someone who didn't fit in. The teachers did not want to take responsibility for them. We tried to help in the core subjects all the time. We were unable to help as many pupils it did not work.

Table 1. The results on national tests at the end of compulsory school, showing percentage of students reaching the pass level.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Swedish	91 (96)	91 (96)	94 (97)	95 (97)	98 (95)	100 (97)
English	93 (96)	90 (95)	95 (96)	89 (96)	99 (96)	99 (97)
Mathematics	69 (88)	91 <sup>a</sup> (84)	80 (84)	85 (87)	84 (89)	95 (82)

Note: Figure given in brackets is the national average.

<sup>a</sup>The average test score in mathematics is high in 2007 due to low student participation.

The trend was clearly in the wrong direction, and the results were falling in spite of teachers' ambitious work and school activities. The number of students who were picked out from ordinary activities grew increasingly. No one returned to the regular classroom after having been supported for a short period to 'catch up'. Special education teachers initiated a discussion with the headmaster about how it might be possible to change the situation. The educational staff initiated the change process.

### *A vision takes shape*

The weak results in 2007 were a wake-up call. The politicians of the local Education Board instructed the head of administration to develop the business in the direction of greater effectiveness through goal fulfilment. The message was that the school's organisation and content would be reviewed under the existing policy documents and that this would take place within the existing financial framework. No new funds for development work would be provided. Changes would take place through redistribution and efficiency.

Operational responsibility for the work was given to one of the municipal headmasters who was given a more clearly defined task as the primary school head and educational leader. Together with one of the special educators, he was to execute the goal of all students being approved in all subjects in 2010. The motto was 'Student success – the school's responsibility'. Central to achieving the goals of the curriculum and the syllabus was the principle of inclusion. The leaders emphasised that ability grouping and traditional special education were less feasible ways to achieve the vision of full goal fulfilment:

If we don't bring them back in class now we will have established a situation of exclusion for these children. ... We also talked about their forecast for the future. Where are these students in ninth grade? What happens in high school? What do we want to school them into? (Special educator)

A different task was to convince the school staff that it was possible to teach all pupils in mainstream classes and that the specific support would mainly be given there. The increase in academic performance was used as part of the argument to persuade the staff. Perhaps an even more difficult task was to get parents and students to see the logic of breaking up the small special groups. In order to strengthen their own arguments, they consulted current educational research. Relevant research literature was reviewed and summarised by the primary school head and the special education teacher. These texts were read and discussed at the mandatory literature seminars, and those who wanted to study further were able to borrow the books to be read at their homes:

It's reassuring that it is research based. It was really so, it is not research-based? No, we do not want this. There was a tremendous clarity from staff that we want stuff that lasts. There is a sense of security. (Teacher)

The primary school head, besides having the role of an educational leader, had responsibility for resource management and distribution among staff. Teachers who supported the change process and were willing to actively contribute to this could be placed in key positions, while less enthusiastic colleagues could wait in the initial phase. The closing down of the special education groups meant that even students with diagnosed

problems such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and language disorder came to be included in the mainstream groups. At the same time, it was decided that there would be two teachers in all classes in Swedish, mathematics and English in grades 6 and 7 and as far as possible in grades 8 and 9. The teachers who went into the classes to support the category of students who were previously segregated were all trained in the special education field and had some form of training and experience in mentoring. Together with the subject teacher, they initiated a pedagogical discussion about what happened during the lesson and why, how could they get further and so on.

The inclusive perspective was strongly reflected in all school activities. The politicians were briefed and informed themselves more than they had done previously. Closer cooperation with other administrations that the school staff was dependent on, such as social services, leisure management and technical management, also came into being:

Inclusion is not just about personal feelings. But it's just as much about the others in the group, how to meet different people, how you look at people. (Special educator)

This is a view of people, it's about, in the lifelong perspective, how do we view our fellow human beings. (Special educator)

The biggest gain is that these people who grow up and have different people around them they bring a different outlook. And they are the ones who will decide in the future. The biggest gain is for all other students. (Special education teacher)

The interviews and the observed activity revealed a consensus on the principles of equality and the right to meaningful participation in school activities. There was also the long-term aim that the pupils would have exposure to the differences that exist between people. The staff found quite quickly that the core values that they held were central to the inclusion perspective.

In student interviews, students with autism described the self-esteem that they regained when they not only participated in class discussions but also contributed to them. All the interviewed students stressed that attending the same classes had a positive effect on them, describing it as a 'win-win' situation. Students with a high level of achievement said 'because there are two teachers, of course everybody gets more help'. Given that they spend their free time together, they found it strange that they would not be in the same classroom during school time.

### ***Classroom observations***

As has been mentioned earlier, a large number of classroom observations were made. The aim was to study the work with the students and how activities in the classroom were designed 3 years after the change process had begun. The notes taken during class time were expanded with comments and quotes from the informal conversations with the teachers and students immediately after each lesson.

A critical factor in the change process has been the shift in view of the responsibility for student achievement. The motto 'Student success – the school's responsibility' summarises responsibilities and permeates teachers' statements, both in interviews and in informal conversations. There are also explicit expressions to be found in the observed teaching. Barriers of a practical nature are eliminated, and the teachers make sure that things such as books, pens and so on that the students depend on to

work are available. If necessary, the teachers take care of student materials between teaching sessions. Students who do not have a change of clothes for sports lesson may choose to take a long walk or to participate in their ordinary clothes. The teachers ensure that students with dyslexic problems get a copy of notes taken by their classmates before tests. One teacher expressed that she now ‘negotiates’ with the students to a much greater extent than before. For example, if a student does not want to read, there is usually another task that is more challenging or important to work on for the student.

During the observed lessons, whether these are regular lessons, homework help or ‘Holiday school’,<sup>1</sup> the teachers are explicit in their approach. It takes a real effort to succeed, but the teachers are always available to support the students in their work. ‘It’s about you absolutely. You do, and must do the job. We can succeed together (Teacher)’.

### *Structure and clarity*

Creating an explicit structure that the students can recognise has been one of the main points highlighted in the interviews. This has been mentioned as critical to students with certain disabilities as they are included in the regular classroom teaching. By asking them questions such as ‘How does teaching need to be designed to help you succeed?’, the pupils themselves get an opportunity to express their needs. When the teachers try to adapt their teaching, the pupils no longer have any motive for not working.

When the students enter the classroom, the lesson structure is written on the whiteboard, and as a result, they know exactly what to start working on. The characteristics of the starter activity vary. It may be to pick up the materials needed for the actual work, read a text, solve a maths task written on the board or pick up the homework. Some teachers also write the workflow for the entire lesson. A pre-prepared lesson plan does not necessarily mean that the teachers strictly stick to it. If necessary, the teachers change the plan, and this may be for a number of reasons. The students may ask questions that lead into something that the teacher considers important to discuss or something that may need to be explained, repeated or illustrated in a different way than the intended.

All the observed teachers followed a rich variety of teaching methods. Work is carried out in the whole class<sup>2</sup> and in groups as well as individually and in pairs. Discussions are carried out with the whole class, in groups and with individual students. Because the students know what to start with as soon as they enter the classroom, the use of time is effective. As one teacher puts it: ‘Students always know what to do and what I expect of them and what they can expect from me. No one in the classroom should ever have to think about what am I here to do’.

When introducing new areas of work, the teachers are careful and clear about the link with the curriculum goals and the quality standards and criteria for the different grade levels. The meaning of the words used in the formulation of goals and criteria is examined together with the students. In connection with the presentation of a new field of work, the pupils get a written rough plan for the work specifying goals and criteria, submission dates for written work, test dates and other things of importance. Recurrent connections and, if necessary, a revision of the plan are also made while the work is in progress.

### **Control**

If a student does not show up at the start of the lesson or to an agreed appointment, the staff go looking for the student and, if possible, bring the student back into the lesson. A call to the student's mobile phone or a text message is used when teachers and students have agreed to seek out the student in this way. Agreements can be made that the teachers use SMS or mail as a reminder about homework, tests or other things agreed upon.

Teachers' commitment takes several forms, and they also show the students in different ways that they are aware of whether, how and with what the students are working. This is not just in the class but also in the corridor; a teacher can sit with a student to talk about matters such as the previous day's lesson. 'The lesson yesterday, you didn't get too much done. Was there any particular reason for that?' or 'Yesterday you got a lot work done which was good. Was there anything in particular that made you able to work so well?'

The teachers play an obvious authoritative adult role. There is never any doubt about who is a teacher and has adult responsibilities during classes in hallways, the dining room or elsewhere within the school. The teachers clearly indicate to the students that they believe in their ability to succeed. One could consider this as a tacit agreement between the students and the teachers. When a student violates the agreement, the reaction from the teachers is clear and specific.

### **'Holiday school'**

Teaching activities are held during the holidays throughout the year. Students in grades 8 and 9 are given priority to attend, but, if necessary, this can also be suggested to students from other grade levels. 'Holiday school' is primarily intended for those students in need of special support to reach the level of goal fulfilment. Summer holiday school is completely free for all students to sign up for. Teachers who teach grade 9 students in Swedish, mathematics and English in the regular activities, as well as the special education teacher who primarily works in the current year, are the first to be asked if they want to teach during these days.

Each student together with his regular teacher writes down what needs to be worked on, and this list is available for the 'holiday school' teachers. Teaching is mainly in the form of one-to-one tuition. However, if there are two or three students who need special mathematical content, the teacher works with the students together alternating with one-to-one tuition. Also in this form of teaching, the teachers are clear about what knowledge the students need to reach the pass level. Teaching is characterised by a rich variety of explanatory models, feedback to the students and demonstrated skills. It is also focused on the subject matter. Consideration is given to the students who express a need to sit separately and work, but not without a teacher checking that the students are able to do the work on their own. There are clear goals and determination in the work of the teachers that the students need to develop an understanding and not just a 'quick fix' of the tasks.

Special education, called extra session, in the form of a special education teacher teaching one student at a time, is also used voluntarily. For ethical reasons, such teaching was not observed. In interviews with special educators, special education teachers and students, it was said that the students at these events are working to build the basic knowledge and skills that for various reasons are lacking. This activity is described by

the students to be essential for them to be able to feel involved and thus included in the regular teaching.

### *Homework assistance*

Two afternoons a week, homework assistance is offered, for an hour at a time. This is open to everyone but can be written into an individual action plan when necessary. There are several teachers present, and this is highlighted as one of the most important and 'best' aspects from the students' and parents' points of view. As one student put it, 'At home you cannot always get help and then you ignore doing it'. However, if teachers representing that particular subject which each student works with are not available, the pupils help each other with their tasks.

During homework assistance, the teachers move between students and help them when asked. The students sit where they feel comfortable, which means that they are found not only in the classroom but also in adjacent areas such as study rooms and lounges. The students who use this regularly take advantage of the time, and the older students are especially focused on their work. This affects in a significantly positive way the students who arrive for the first time and students from grade 6 to whom this activity is new. After a bit of small talk, even these students turn to concentrate on their work.

### *Ambition to succeed*

The observed teaching shows that both teachers and students have higher ambitions than to create a teaching situation focusing only on the pass level according to the grading criteria. All the students use the additional resource in the classroom that is available when there are two teachers during class time. The pupils show clear ambitions and expectations that they will receive support and help with explanations, production of materials and other items required for them to achieve the aims of a higher grade. Before a test, the teachers sometimes have produced data and questions which the students can work through. This material relates to the different requirement levels. In some cases, they discuss this material with all the students. By the choice of questions and formulations, the teachers highlight important subject content in such a way that they get, if not all, in any case, most students in a class involved in the discussion.

It is not just the teachers who show commitment. Being successful in school appears to be important for the students also. As described above, many of them make use of support such as homework assistance, and it is not just the students who strive to get a pass. There is also an opportunity for the students with the ambition to achieve a higher grade to discuss an issue or get something explained to them once more. When the students get the test results back, no one 'boasts' that they have not succeeded. Instead, they speak of their disappointment at not reaching a higher grade when comparing their results with those of their classmates.

### **Discussion**

Two concepts are central in this article: achievement and inclusion. It is not claimed that the improvement in academic results was directly brought about by moves to inclusion. However, the greater level of awareness about research, curriculum and teaching

methods, etc. was said during all the interviews to be dependent on the idea of inclusion.

The informants do not problematise the concept of inclusion, either ideologically or politically. The concept was established firmly in the literature studied, but with a clear reference to the perceived functioning in practical activities. At the same time, it is obvious that they have established a *thought style* in which inclusion is a guiding principle for teaching and learning, but where the wider aim is a more inclusive society. According to this way of understanding inclusion, there is a common commitment to the principles of equality and meaningful participation in school activities. But the ultimate objective is that the students already in the early school years should meet with the natural variability of the differences between people (Persson 2010).

Studies of common literature in combination with two teachers in the classroom during lessons led to intensified pedagogical discussions. The choice of key staff with skills to mentor colleagues is crucial now that the teachers accustomed to being alone in the classroom not only would teach students who previously were extracted but also had a colleague in the classroom. Research literature gave a professional language to support the articulation of the goal that everyone should succeed in the classroom. When the staff used a common language and a scientific perspective in their everyday work, it meant that they, through the educational conversation, became more informed and no one was excluded from this. The teachers' professionalism has been strengthened. They are proud of their profession, and they know why they are at work. They have chosen to work with children and talk about the responsibility that this entails. The pupils' results in connection with their efforts make them proud of the teaching profession. This is also partly related to inclusion. They have to engage all children in class and they know that this works.

The educational leadership was crucial. The primary school head received a mandate from both politicians and the head of administration with a virtually free hand to carry out the mission, that all students should be eligible for secondary education on a national programme when they leave primary school. He also had legitimacy from below. The former weak results were such that the staff expected him to do something. Earlier ability groupings did not work and results and rating statistics were not very positive. 'Nobody wants to work in Sweden's worst school'. School administration and teachers gathered modern and relevant educational research, which led to a collective capacity-building.

Results from a large Norwegian study (Haug 2011) show that more than half the time students are working on topics in the classroom and then mainly with tasks that are individual. Classroom activities led by the teacher, according to Haug, have declined substantially in recent years, while students receive little direct support from the teacher. The analysis of the classroom observations in this study shows a different picture. One interesting observation is the way in which instructional time is utilised. The students are well aware of the importance of using class time efficiently in order to have the opportunity to learn as much as possible. The students know what to start with and they also know the goal of the lesson. The teachers play an active role in the classroom and use a rich variety of working methods. By leading discussions and being responsive to students' questions, they can vary their teaching so that all the students are challenged.

Fleck (1997) talks about understanding teaching as a result of historically developed 'thought threads'. By combining the thought of teaching all children in the same classroom with the thought of using one-to-one tuition, if required, the two measures interact

in a positive way. In the regular class, all students can access the interactions and dynamics that can arise in conversations and discussions, both between students and between teachers and students when students' differences are used as a resource in teaching. The regular class is usually taught by a teacher who is trained specifically in the subject of instruction to be given, which should guarantee that the teacher has a thorough knowledge not only in the subject but also in what is referred to as 'pedagogical content knowledge'. In one-to-one tuition, the student normally meets a special education teacher. This teacher may have his or her basic training in the subject that the student needs extra help with, but this is not always the case. This is also one of the major problems of the small teaching groups where special education teachers are expected to manage all student teaching. These teachers have instead an important understanding of how students with different problems need to be supported. The aim in this school is to allow either a recognised skilled teacher or a special education teacher with specific knowledge in the subject that the students need support in to teach the students in one-to-one teaching. The combination of participating in regular education classes and receiving one-to-one instruction may be viewed as one of the success factors in the work with pupils with special needs. Opening the classrooms and allowing two teachers to be involved in teaching also enabled all the students to receive extra help. Extra help means better results and in the long term more motivation. The studied municipality has managed to bring together the public requirements of goal achievement with all students' motivation and drive at all levels.

The primary school head's repeated mantra – that all will succeed in the classroom and that this is the responsibility of the school – resulted in what Fleck (1997, 104) describes as 'a gentle coercion' to everyone, staff, students and parents, to enter a thought style underpinned by inclusive principles. The common reading of the research literature and common pedagogical discussions gave what Fleck and Douglas describe as the common 'mental preparedness and desire to see and act in a way and not another' (Fleck 1997, 70). The result shows that the earlier tradition of blaming a student's school failures on extrinsic circumstances, 'There were problems with the family and it was a single mother here and there, we found external causes all the time', could be broken.

It is also clear that the teacher group as a whole relied on the members of thought collective, who according to Fleck can be described as 'the initiated members' (105) of the esoteric circle. They listened to and relied on the primary school head and the special educator who was the driving core of change. The members of the exoteric circle of the thought collective had influence, and thanks to the quick results that appeared in student performance, they came to accept the new thought style. The vision of inclusion developed is not a once-and-for-all conquered process but something that must constantly be reconquered and never be taken for granted. By continuing to read research literature, discussing and introducing new staff to their thought style, they try to do this.

The major challenge in the municipality is to maintain the performance level that has been achieved. The 2011 results are an important quality indicator. Perhaps most important is that the students feel that school is important and that they are not interested only in getting high grades. It is exciting to conquer new knowledge and that one will not be regarded as deviant because one thinks so. For the future, it is not important to defend the leading position in the rankings. What matters is the extent to which 'changed perspective' has become entrenched and how stable and robust school activities will be against different types of challenges and pressures. It has been shown that

the activity did not stand and fall with the driving forces behind the change. When the primary manager left, the municipality responded by filling the gap with its own staff. What makes this case significant is that the urgent work to improve the school was not a project run with enhanced resources. Instead, the municipality interpreted the policy documents, took note of the relevant research, used tried and tested approaches, and designed its own development model. This should bring hope in several municipalities in terms of improving their own school and perhaps even among the country's education officials in cases concerned with the Swedish school's future.

## Notes

1. During the autumn holiday, winter holiday, and Easter and summer holidays, students who need extra support can attend what they call 'holiday school'. I will return to this later in the article.
2. It is worth mentioning that the so-called pulpit teaching is now mandatory in Sweden. The 2011 School Ordinance states: Students should through structured teaching be provided a consistent and active teacher support to the extent necessary to create conditions that students reach the proficiency requirements at least be reached and otherwise develop as far as possible within the framework of education (SFS 2011:185, Chapter 5, § 2).

## Notes on contributor

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