**WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? – EXPLANATIONS OF SCHOOL DIFFICULTIES BY EIGHT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS**

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*Data from four different questionnaires are analyzed. Explanations of school problems are compared for chief education officers, principals (in municipal and independent schools), subject teachers, class teachers, special teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), and assistants. Explanations involving deficits tied to the individual child were by far most common. Teachers and principals were the groups least likely to view teachers as a cause of school problems. Principals were even less likely to do so than the teachers themselves, and this was also the group that was least likely to consider the functioning of classes as an explanation of school difficulties. A* school-leadership paradox *is identified, meaning that principals discern causes of school problems that are not within their influence.*

Children and youth spend more time than ever before in educational environments. In several countries, education has emerged as a prerequisite to finding work in the labor market. In this way, school failure might to an even higher degree than before lead to negative consequences as regards the pupils involved. Political reform has not been able to change the fact that many children experience failure and disappointment in schools. It goes without saying that this phenomenon needs a multifaceted research approach in order to be properly understood. Some researchers suggest that the issue does not so much concern what works but rather to apply working procedures that are backed up by research findings (Hattie, 2009, Mitchell, 2007). However, evidence-based research is one thing and school reality another. Several scholars suggest that it is crucial to understand the thinking of the participants involved in school settings in order to understand what is going on there (for example, van Manen, 1993).

Thus, it seems necessary to investigate how different school professionals explain school problems in order to further our understanding of school failure. It appears, for example, that a prerequisite to be able to help children with problems is that professionals in school settings believe that they can influence the outcome of schooling. In the present article, data from four questionnaires is used in order to investigate how different groups in the Swedish school system explain school problems. More specifically, explanations of school problems are explored and compared for chief education officers, principals (in municipal and independent schools), subject teachers, class teachers, special teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and assistants. Altogether, explanations of school problems are compared for eight different groups at different levels of the school system. Before turning to the empirical investigation, we will discuss the notion of school problems and relevant prior research as well as provide an account of the Swedish school system and the role of the groups studied within it.

***Explanations of school problems***

Ainscow (1998) distinguishes between three different types of explanations of school problems: 1) deficit; 2) interactive; and 3) curriculum-based explanations. The first category refers to explanations of school problems that localize the cause of the problem within the child. Thus, the child is the reason as to why problems appear in schooling. Such deficits could be seen as intrinsic qualities of the child and/or as consequences of upbringing. In interactive approaches, on the other hand, school problems are explained as emerging in the interaction between the individual child and the school environment. Evidently the explanation of school problems will vary along a dimension where weight could be put either on the deficits of children or on shortcomings in the school environment. Finally, the curriculum view radically challenges traditional ways of explaining school problems. It takes its point of departure in the belief that differences between children are natural and that differences should be celebrated. Thus, the curriculum has to be adapted to handle the differences between children. In this way, school problems are signs of a poorly functioning learning environment.

In their famous book *Pygmalion in the classroom*, Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) argued that teacher expectations are very influential in determining school achievement. As is well known, their methodological approach has been much criticized (Spitz, 1999). However, Stevenson and Sigler (1992) maintain that different conceptions concerning children's learning account for wide differences between the educational systems in Japan and the USA. They claim that the former system takes its point of departure in the idea that all children can learn while the latter explains individual differences as the outcome of given talents of a more or less biological origin. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the consequences of teacher expectations (Weinstein et al., 2002). In summarizing research about teacher expectations, Hattie (2009, p 124) concludes: *Based on this evidence, teachers must stop overemphasizing ability and start emphasizing progress*. Expectations seem to be no less important when the concern is children who struggle at school. Consequently it seems important to further investigate how teachers account for school problems. However, other groups in the school system are also influential regarding children who are at risk of school failure. School leaders at different levels of the school system, as well as support staff, are key actors in this area. Thus, there is a need for large studies of how these groups account for the reasons for school problems. The way school problems are explained is closely linked to assumptions about the possibilities that schooling can make a difference (cf. Stevenson & Sigler, 1992). If school problems are seen to be caused by deficits within the child, for example, the scope for schools to influence the development of pupils seems to be restricted.

*Occupational groups and school problems*

Forlin and Rose (2010) point out the importance of cooperation in order to create more inclusive practices for children who experience problems in schools. Such cooperation would presumably be more profitable if different groups in schools define school problems in similar ways. However, Ball (1987) points to the *micro-politics* of schooling implying that different groups might have different views and interests. For example, teachers are at times of the opinion that school problems are a concern for support staff rather than for themselves (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007; for an exception see citation Nilholm & Alm, 2010), while special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in several countries are trained to localize school problems in the whole learning environment, that is, to use the interactive perspective described above (see, among others: Abbot, 2007; Cole, 2005; Hargreaves et al, 2007; and Malmgren-Hansen, 2002). However, some SENCOs describe their work as a *war zone* especially when it comes to convincing teachers that children with support needs also are their responsibility (Hargreaves et al., 2007). Thus, we could expect that different occupational groups in schools might define reasons, and consequently also responsibilities, for school problems in different ways (Skrtic, 1991, Dyson & Millward, 2000). The well-recognized problem to establish more inclusive practices (e.g. McLeskey & Waldron, 2007, Nilholm, 2006) might be associated with the way school problems are understood by different occupational groups in schools. Forbes (2009) discusses professional groups' thinking, knowledge bases and practices, and suggests that old professional alliances have to be questioned and identities as co-working practitioners developed (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991) in order for schools to be better able to deal with children experiencing problems (Norwich, 1993).

To sum up what has been said this far: Several scholars point out the significance of expectations in schooling. Moreover, a number of researchers point out the importance of cooperation among different occupational groups for schools to adequately deal with children experiencing problems. However, it is also well recognized that different actors in the school system may have different views on explanations and responsibilities as regards school difficulties. Against this background, it seems to be important to investigate both the general understanding in school systems regarding why children encounter problems in education, as well as the specific understandings of different occupational groups. The present study is to our knowledge the first to address these issues in a study involving several levels of the school system and a large number of occupational groups.

*The Swedish school system*

General compulsory school (age 7-16) in Sweden is regulated by a) the Education Act (Public Law 1100. 1985), b) the General Compulsory School Ordinance (Public Law 1194, 1994), and c) the Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Preschool Class and After-School Program (Government Office, 1994). In the Swedish system, schools and municipalities are given goals by the political system and state authorities. However, *how* the goals should be accomplished has been the responsibility of the municipalities and schools. The goal structure of the Swedish system is quite complex since there are very many goals as regards knowledge, social skills and democratic and other values. In practice, the knowledge goals of Swedish or Swedish as a second language, Math and English play important roles since they are decisive for eligibility to upper secondary education (16-19 years) (Göransson, Nilholm & Karlsson, in press).

In addition to municipal schools there are also independent schools which are not operated by the municipalities but are within the Swedish system. Independent schools abide to the same legislative framework as the municipal schools (Public Law 1206, 1996) and are financed in a similar way. However, independent schools are allowed to make profits. About ten per cent of the pupils within the compulsory school system attend independent schools. In contrast to the U.S., independent schools in the Swedish system were never discussed as a way of increasing equity by offering a choice for socio-economically disadvantaged families (cf. Wong & Shen, 2006). They have rather been debated in terms of possible negative consequences, especially in terms of possible increased segregation. The Swedish school system is at present going through changes involving, among other things, a new curriculum, a new grading system, more explicit knowledge goals, and more testing.

As a general rule, a disability-based classification is not needed according to the legislation in order to receive special support in the Swedish school system for pupils aged 7-16. There are three exceptions to this general rule: 1) Special programs for pupils with an intellectual disability (1.4 % of all pupils aged 7-16) 2) Special schools (involving very few children); and 3) Entitlement for services from the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools is dependent on a disability-based system. Instead, the concept of *pupil in need of special support* (Public Law 1100. 1985) is crucial. A pupil who is considered to be at risk of not reaching the goals is defined as a *pupil in need of special support*. Although not explicit in the legislation, this is often interpreted as relating to the goals in the three *core* subjects of math, Swedish or Swedish as a second language, and English. In addition, children defined as having concentration problems or behavioral difficulties are often provided with special support (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003). More than 40 per cent of the pupils in general compulsory school receive such support at least once and about 17 per cent of the pupils receive special support at any particular point in time (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, in press, Swedish Agency for Education, 2003).

**Method**

The data for this study is collected from four different questionnaires. Six questions appearing in all four questionnaires having to do with how school problems are explained are singled out for analysis. The questionnaires have been used for other analysis before but for the first time the explanations of school problems are compared across questionnaires. This makes it possible for us to compare how different occupational groups in schools explain children´s difficulties which, as has been argued, are a very important research topic. More specifically, we can compare how chief education officers, principals in independent schools, principals in municipal schools, subject teachers, class teachers, SENCOs, special teachers and assistants explain school problems. For some analysis, we will combine the first three groups (school leaders), the next two (teachers) and the last three (resource staff). Thus, the data will show how the occupational groups that are most important in Swedish school understand school problems.

*The questionnaires*

Thus, data from four different questionnaires are compiled here. The questionnaires were sent to: 1) All chief education officers in Swedish municipalities (Nilholm, Persson, Hjerm & Runesson, 2007); 2) All school leaders in Swedish independent schools (Göransson, Magnusson & Nilholm, submitted); 3) All school leaders in one Swedish municipality (Lindqvist & Nilholm, in press); and 4) All preschool and school staff in one Swedish municipality (including subject teachers, class teachers, SENCOs, special teachers, preschool teachers and assistants) (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist & Wetso, in press). An overview of the 4 questionnaires is provided in table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of questionnaires used in the analysis/study**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Questionnaire | Participants | Population | Response rate |
| 1 | Chief education officers, n = 262 | All chief education officers in municipalities in Sweden N = 290 | 90.3% |
| 2 | Principals of independent comprehensive schools n = 546 | All principals in comprehensive independent schools in Sweden N = 686 | 79.6% |
| 3. | Principals of municipal preschools and municipal comprehensive schools n = 45 | All principals in a Swedish municipality N = 45 | 100% |
| 4. | Preschool and school staff n = 940 | All staff in one Swedish municipality N = 1297(subject teachers, class teachers, Sencos, special teachers, assistants, preschool teachers) | 72.5% |

Six questions having to do with how school difficulties are explained appearing in all four questionnaires are analyzed here. Each of these six questions concerned how common the respondents believe a certain explanation for children's need of special support is. Each question provided five response alternatives: 1) very common; 2) rather common; 3) rather uncommon; 4) very uncommon/never occur; 5) no opinion. The six explanations were presented in the following order in all four questionnaires: a) The goals are too difficult for these pupils; b) These pupils have individual deficiencies; c) Schooling is poorly adapted to handle children's differences; d) These pupils have deficiencies in their home environment; e) Some teachers have deficiencies; f) Some classes function badly.

Also, it was possible to suggest other explanations. However, these suggestions were both few in number and divergent and as such are left out of the present analyses. Two of the explanations concern the individual child (b and d), two involve the school system itself (a and c), and two pertain to the classroom level (e and f). It should also be noted that explanations e) and f) are quite conservatively formulated (that is, *some* teachers/classes).

A short description is provided below of the questionnaire, the participants, the procedures, and the response rate for each questionnaire. All questionnaires were preceded by pilot studies. Details differing between the administrations of the questionnaires were most often due to demands particular to the questionnaire. Only the questionnaires to principals in municipal schools were distributed electronically, i.e. the other three questionnaires were distributed in a paper-format through the regular mail system. As shall be seen, rather elaborate steps were taken in order to achieve an acceptable response rate. Overall, the response rate is exceptionally good which we interpret as an indication that work with children in need of special support is considered an important task in the Swedish school system. All data from the participants was treated with confidentiality.

Questions were asked about the work with children in need of special support in the municipality. The questionnaire contained 30 questions. The participants consisted of the school chief education officer (the highest ranking school administrative employee) in the municipality was asked to complete the questionnaire. Two separate mailings were made. Swedish municipalities who did not respond after two mailings were contacted by telephone. The response rate was 90.3% (262 out of 290 municipalities).

The questionnaire contained 36 questions concerning independent schools’ work with pupils in need of special support. The participants consisted of all principals of Swedish independent schools. Four different mailings were made and in the case of no response an additional attempt to reach the principals by telephone was made. The response rate was 80% (546 out of 686 independent schools).

The questions focused on the views of principals regarding children in need of special support in general compulsory schools and in preschools. Fifty-nine questions were asked. The participants were all educational leaders in one Swedish municipality. Only those responses by principals of compulsory schools (N=29) are analyzed in this study. The questionnaire was constructed as a web survey and was sent by e-mail to the participants. The questionnaire was part of a developmental project in the community and intended to survey opinions before intervention. The municipality has 55,000 inhabitants (the average for Swedish municipalities is slightly more than 30,000 inhabitants). The response rate was 100 % (45 out of 45 educational leaders; only compulsory school leaders (N=29) are incorporated in the analysis of the present paper).

The questions focused on the views of staff in compulsory schools and preschools regarding children in need of special support. Sixty-one questions were asked by all staff working in compulsory schools and preschools in a single municipality. The questionnaire was part of a developmental project and intended to survey opinions before intervention. Staff was permitted to answer the questionnaire during work time. The response rate was 72.5 %. The responses of preschool teachers are not included in the present analysis. This consisted of one hundred twenty-three subject teachers, 147 class teachers, 35 SENCOs, 22 special teachers, and 56 assistants responded. The municipality provided a list of the total number of participants in each occupational category. The proportion of questionnaires returned within each occupational category corresponded to the proportion of staff within that category.

*Groups studied and their roles within the school system*

Altogether, explanations of special support needs are studied in eight occupational groups. Three groups consist of educational leaders (chief education officers and principals in independent and municipal schools, two of teachers (subject teachers and class teachers) and three of support staff (special teachers, SENCOs and assistants). We will present a short description of each group and their role within the educational system.

*Educational leaders*

School chief officers have an overarching responsibility for the educational system of a municipality. In the Swedish context, the average size of a municipality is slightly above 30,000 inhabitants with a substantial amount of variation between municipalities. Other educational leaders studied are principals in municipal schools and principals in independent schools. Both of these groups have an overarching responsibility at the school level. The educational leaders have specific responsibilities according to the steering documents concerning children in need of special support.

*Teachers*

Class teacher’s work with children aged 7 to 13 in primary schools. They teach most subjects within the frame of the class and are responsible for the class. Subject teacher’s work most often with pupils aged 13 to 16. They teach one or more subjects. This group is responsible for grading the pupils in eighth grade which, at the time of the study, was the first time the pupils received grades.

*Resource staff*

SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators) (in Swedish: Special pedagogues) teach pupils in need of special educational support as well as supervising teachers and staff, carrying out documentation work, assessments, and completing evaluations, and at times helping with organizational development in schools and preschools. (SENCO is actually a term used in Great Britain. However, the roles of SENCOs and Special pedagogues are alike in that both groups are supposed to work with the whole learning environment.) Special teachers are, to a larger extent than SENCOs, supposed to work directly with children and/or with small groups of children. Special teachers only work in schools. Assistant resource staff works close to children between 1 and 16 years of age.

**Results**

Answers in the *No opinion* category will be left out of the analysis for the sake of simplicity in presenting a complex data pattern (less than 10% used this response alternative in every group for a given factor). Firstly, the general response pattern will be described. Then comparisons between all the occupational groups studied will be presented. Finally, the eight groups will be combined into three: school leaders; teachers; and support staff, and the response pattern of the combined groups will be examined.

Means for particular explanations were calculated for each group. Thus, each of the response alternatives in the questionnaires: (1) very common 2) rather common 3) rather uncommon 4) very uncommon/never occur) were assigned a numerical value (1-4) and averages over group members for each explanation were calculated. The scales presented in the results section are inverted:4) very common 3) rather common 2) rather uncommon and 1) very uncommon/never occur. No inferential statistics were used since all of the questionnaires involved whole populations.

*General pattern*

As can be seen in figure 1 where the weighed mean for all the groups (that is, each group carries the same weight) is shown, employees in Swedish compulsory schools tend to judge the child's own shortcomings as the most common explanation for school problems. Goal difficulty is seen as an almost as common explanation as children's individual deficits. Pointing out goal difficulty as an explanation of school problems can be interpreted as a way of saying that some children will not be able to reach the goals, that is, as a less direct version of a *deficit view*. It might also, in contrast to the more direct deficit view, imply that the goals of school need to be changed. The views that schools are poorly adapted to handle children's differences, and deficits in the home environment, were virtually as common explanations of children's need of special support as pupils' individual deficits, and that the goals are too difficult. Less weight is put on teacher, or the functioning of school classes, as reasons for school problems.

**Figure 1. Explanations to why children are in need of special support – general pattern.**

Weighted mean for all groups (1=very uncommon/never occur, 2=rather uncommon, 3=rather common, 4=very common).

Explanations involving factors attached to the individual child and to the system level appear to be seen as the most common explanations of school difficulties. Least common are explanations involving factors at the school level that is the functioning of classes and teacher deficits. Thus, employees in the Swedish school system tend to view factors that are hard to influence as the ones that cause the need for special support. The two factors that any individual school is best able to influence, that is the quality of teachers and the functioning of classes, are the ones that are seen as the least common causes of school problems. It should also be kept in mind that these explanations were quite conservatively formulated (*some* teachers/classes).

*Comparisons between all occupational groups*

Table 2 shows the mean of each explanatory factor for each occupational group studied. Subject teachers and assistants are the groups that most often view individual deficits as an explanation of school problems even though this explanation is regarded as the most or second most common by all of the groups except for the principals in municipal schools. The tendency that the dominating explanations are those either directly grounded in deficits (pupil's individual deficits, deficiencies in the home environment), or indirectly tied to the individual child (goals are too difficult), holds for all groups with some variations between groups. In addition, the system-level explanation that school is poorly adapted to handle children's differences is quite common among all groups.

The most noteworthy differences between groups emerge when comparing the explanations involving teacher deficits and class functioning. Class teachers and subject teachers and principals in municipal and independent schools are the groups that least often consider that some teachers have deficits to be a common explanation for school problems. Assistants are most prone to view teacher’s deficits as an explanation of school problems. The explanation that some classes function badly is least often considered as a cause of school problems by principals in municipal and independent schools. Chief education officers are also less prone to point out the functioning of classes as an explanation of school problems. Assistants and special teachers are most likely to view the functioning of classes as explaining school difficulties.

**Table 2. Explanations to why children are in need of special support – comparison between all occupational groups.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | SCO | PMS | | PIS | | | CT | | ST | | SENC | | SPEC | | ASS | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | | | *m* | | *sd* | *m* | | *sd* | | *m* | | *sd* | | *m* | | *sd* | | *m* | *sd* | *m* | *sd* | *m* | *sd* | *m* |
| Goals are  too difficult | | | 2.93 | | .77 | 3.38 | | .97 | | 2.79 | | .94 | | 2.87 | | .93 | | 3.02 | 1.16 | 3.41 | .96 | 3.32 | .78 | 3.06 |
| Pupils  individual deficits | | | 2.93 | | .83 | 3.10 | | 1.14 | | 3.31 | | .80 | | 3.18 | | .84 | | 3.32 | 1.12 | 2.93 | .74 | 3.27 | .77 | 3.28 |
| School is  poorly adapted | | | 2.84 | | .78 | 3.24 | | .94 | | 2.49 | | 1.13 | | 2.76 | | .91 | | 2.93 | 1.12 | 2.91 | .92 | 3.18 | .80 | 3.04 |
| Deficiencies in  home environment | | | 3.04 | | .80 | 3.00 | | 1.12 | | 3.03 | | 1.04 | | 2.91 | | .86 | | 3.00 | 1.09 | 2.85 | .74 | 3.09 | .68 | 3.15 |
| Teachers  individual deficits | | | 2.59 | | .82 | 2.33 | | 1.35 | | 2.27 | | .92 | | 2.44 | | 1.13 | | 2.43 | 1.14 | 2.51 | .74 | 2.59 | .85 | 2.80 |
| Classes  function badly | | | 2.49 | | .84 | 2.19 | | 1.12 | | 2.40 | | 1.04 | | 2.63 | | .98 | | 2.58 | 1.08 | 2.56 | .66 | 2.86 | .71 | 2.91 |

*Note.* Range 1-4 (1=very uncommon/never occur, 2=rather uncommon, 3=rather common, 4=very common).

SCO=School chief officers, PMS=Principals in municipal schools, 3=Principals in independent schools, CT=Class teachers, ST=Subject teachers, SENC=SENCOS’s, SPEC=Special teachers, ASS=Assistants

As can be seen in table 2, within group standard deviances for all variables vary between .53 and 1.35. Seventeen out of 48 standard deviations exceed 1.0. Sixteen out of these 17 appear among principals in municipal (4) and independent schools (3), subject teachers (6) and assistants (3). Thus, there seems to be more divergent opinions among these groups in comparison to the other groups as regards explanations of why children encounter problems in schools.

*Combined groups*

Table 3 shows the weighted averages of the responses of school leaders, teachers, and resource staff. The rank order of the level of commonness attached to the different explanations is fairly similar between the three groups. Thus, all groups consider pupils individual deficits as the most or second most (resource staff) common reason for school difficulties. Moreover, factors tied to the individual child are generally seen as more common explanations of school difficulties than the factor tied to the system level (school is poorly adapted). However, school leaders and resource staff consider the system level factor to a more common explanation of school problems than the home environment. Across all three groups, explanations tied to the classroom (teachers, the functioning of classes) are least often considered as reasons for school difficulties. School leaders are least prone to identify explanations of school problems at this level.

**Table 3. . Explanations to why children are in need of special support – combined groups**.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | School leaders | Teachers | Resource staff |  |  |  |
|  | | *m* | *sd* | *m* | *sd* | *m* |
| Goals are too difficult | | 2.85 | .89 | 2.92 | 1.02 | 3.22 |
| Pupils individual deficits | | 3.18 | .84 | 3.23 | .95 | 3.18 |
| School is poorly adapted | | 2.63 | 1.04 | 2.82 | .99 | 3.03 |
| Deficiencies in home environment | | 3.03 | .89 | 2.94 | .95 | 3.05 |
| Teachers individual deficits | | 2.94 | .98 | 2.44 | 1.23 | 2.67 |
| Classes function badly | | 3.05 | .98 | 2.61 | 1.02 | 2.79 |

*Note.* Range 1-4 (1=very uncommon/never occur, 2=rather uncommon, 3=rather common, 4=very common).

Weighted mean for school leaders, teachers and resource staff.

**Discussion**

Summarizing the results, it seems that explanations tied to individual children's deficits are the most common regarding support needs and school problems in the Swedish compulsory school system. Moreover, factors that are hard for individual schools and staff to influence are considered to be major causes of school problems. In other words, the scope of agency with regard to school problems is considered to be limited. The two factors that individual schools can to some extent control, that is teaching and the classroom environment, are considered to have a lesser role in the genesis of support needs. This pattern is especially apparent among principals, whether in municipal or independent schools. However, this pattern is not shared by the chief education officers. In addition, teachers are less prone to view teachers' deficits as explanations of school problems. In the remainder of the paper we will discuss possible reasons first for the general pattern found, secondly for the differences between the different occupational groups, and lastly the consequences of the observed patterns.

*Why is the deficit view so influential?*

The deficit view indeed has a strong tradition internationally (Ainscow, 1998) as well as in Sweden (Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, in press, Haug, 1999), even though it has been repeatedly challenged at the policy level. For example, in Sweden this is evidenced by the fact that three official reports proposed a change of wording in the Education Act from *pupils with special educational needs* (e.g. OSGR 121, 1997) to *students in need of special support*. However, there are also signs of a lack of unambiguous political steering in the Swedish context (e.g. Ekström, 2004, Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, in press) which means that a lot of decision making regarding special needs is located at the school level (Forbes, 2009, Lindqvist et al., in press). In this way, tradition may have become unchallenged. Moreover, medical discourses evidently play an important role in the individualization of school problems (e.g. Skrtic, 1991), not least given the increased influence of DSM-4 (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as can be seen in the increased use of *neuropsychiatric diagnoses* (Baughman & Hovey, 2006). On the other hand, explanations involving the school system also seem comparatively common. Clark, Dyson & Millward (1998) point out that the well-established deficit view of special needs has been partly challenged, at least by the research community. There are some signs of this challenge in the empirical data in the present investigation. On the other hand, explanations involving the school level have, in a sense, the same implications as the deficit view, that is that individual schools find it difficult to make a difference.

*How can group differences be explained?*

Against the background that explanations involving the individual pupil and/or the system level dominate in all groups, it is very interesting to focus on group differences regarding the role of teachers and classes in the genesis of school problems. Perhaps it is not unexpected that teachers do not generally see themselves or their colleagues as causes of school problems. It is well known that teachers often consider special needs to be the responsibility of support staff (see for example Persson, 1998, Skrtic, 1991). SENCOs are, on the other hand, trained to localize school problems in the whole learning environment (Cole, 2005, Hargreaves et al, 2007). The most surprising finding is that principals (both in independent and municipal schools) are the groups least likely to find deficits in teaching and the functioning of classes as a common explanation with reference to special needs. We would like to label the phenomenon that principals believe that school problems are caused by factors that they cannot influence as the *school-leadership paradox*. One hypothesis in explaining this state of affairs concerns the fact that principals work in close proximity to teachers and are responsible for the schools and the functioning of teachers as well as of classes. Following this line of reasoning, the principals' role as *defenders* of the their schools might account for their response pattern.

*Consequences of the observed pattern*

There are several aspects of the empirical data that indicate that it is hard to change the view that pupils are very often considered as the locus of school problems. It has been pointed out repeatedly that principals are very influential regarding inclusive and special education (e.g. Dyal et al., 1996; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998;Heimdahl, Mattson & Malmgren; Hansen, 2009; see Riehl, 2000, for an extensive overview). However, *principals neither in municipal nor in independent schools believe that factors that the local school is in a position to control play an important role in the genesis of school problems*. Since the influential group of teachers (cf. Dyson & Millward, 2000) does not generally consider teaching to be involved in the genesis of school problems, it appears that there does not seem to be much room for the views of resource staff who believe that teaching is a quite common explanation of school problems. We should therefore not be surprised that it has proven difficult for special education teachers to establish a new role in schools (Abbot, 2007, Cole, 2005, Hargreaves et al, 2007, Malmgren-Hansen, 2002). Interestingly, chief education officers are more prone to localize problems at the school level than the other school leaders. However, no group seems at a general level to be convinced that individual schools can make a big difference to pupils' learning. To reiterate, Hattie (2009, p 124) concluded after reviewing research about expectancy: *Based on this evidence, teachers must stop overemphasizing ability and start emphasizing progress*. According to the pattern found in our empirical investigation, it seems even more urgent that principals, as well as school staff in general, need to re-examine their views on the need to emphasize progress to make a difference to children´s lives. Of course, to what extent we interpret the views of the school staff studied as realistic or restraining is conditional upon our own views on individual schools' potential. Nevertheless, recent research into the response-to-instruction approach (Berkeley et al., 2009, Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009), as well as syntheses of research (Hattie, 2009, Mitchell, 2007), indicate that schools can indeed make a difference.

*Concluding discussion*

The data of the present investigation might lead to negative expectations as regards the development of more inclusive educational practices since the deficit perspective is so firmly established and schools have rather low trust in their ability to make a change. However, we would like to finish on a more positive note. We suggest that the response rates to the four questionnaires imply that all occupational groups believe that the work with children with school difficulties is important. Moreover, we can see some challenges to the deficit perspective in certain groups and also within each group. We believe that more research is needed in order to illustrate how schools can change their practices to become more inclusive. A prerequisite for this, as is amply illustrated by the present investigation, is that discussions between and within different occupational groups in schools about why children encounter difficulties is needed. Moreover, it does seem as more in-service training regarding these issues is needed.

From a more scientific perspective it should be noted that the questions analyzed yielded important data. However, it is of course possible to involve additional explanations in the response alternatives and/or be more specific as regards type of problem (e.g. why do children encounter problems in math?). However, we do believe that on important conclusion from the present study concerns the fruitfulness of an approach that targets the extremely important issue of how school problems are explained in larger samples of occupational groups in schools. We do hope that this investigation will be supplemented with additional studies in different contexts and/or with variations in methodology.

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