

Essunga Municipality Schools

What was the main aim of the measure?

The main aim of the measures was to decrease school absenteeism and to raise levels of achievement, and ensure that primary school students enter lower secondary school. The starting point was to give all students the opportunity to succeed in their regular classes through inclusive education.

What is/are the target group or groups?

The measure is targeted to pupils at risk of ESL, with particular attention to those at extreme levels of risk.

Is this a periodic/temporary measure or an ongoing intervention?

Ongoing

Where does the funding come from?

Local funding

What were the conditions and steps taken that have contributed most to the success of the measure?

Classroom organisation:

- Introducing new teaching methods: lesson-plans were structured with clearer goals and more learning time. Time was allotted for students to work in small groups as well as for individual worktime. Students thus had opportunities for both collaboration and independent working. This was essential for learners with special needs, but also proved to be beneficial for all students in the classroom. Learner feedback was integrate in assessment and planning.

Improved collaboration between school staff:

- Teamwork among teachers, special pedagogues, counsellors, nurses, psychologists, social workers and others.
- Development of a network responsive to individual learners and providing 'different solutions for different children'
- Provision of support and intervention as early as possible

School organisation

- Mainstreaming of all learners in grades 6–9 who had been placed in special education groups. Swedish schools have traditionally separated mainstream and special education groups. Co-teaching was established between special education and regular teachers. This decision was supported by research showing that heterogeneous classes benefit students both socially and in terms of results (Persson 2007).
- In-class support. Some special education students received some one-to-one support (e.g. for students with autism). Class sizes were reduced and flexible timetabling was introduced. This included extra hours for extracurricular activities: e.g. leisure activities; homework club, school trips.

The transformation and success of learners has been attributed to bonding, bridging and linking practices to connect learners to one another. In addition, the strong norms and values to which they were exposed were important (these relate to highlighting the importance of personal goal achievement, building confidence and supporting success, as well as helping other students to achieve).

A ten-year research project, which monitored the process from its start in 2007, highlighted the success of the measures over the long term.

- Political leaders are involved in the field and understand how things really are

- Principals and supporting functions (e.g. special needs staff) work together to understand the challenges of the school. Involving all professionals in a common reflective process.
- Teachers are supported by researchers, principals and special needs pedagogues to try to better recognise, understand and support each pupil, together with colleagues in those areas where the greatest difficulties are recognised.
- All parties are involved in a search for a joint approach to development of the local school within the local community.

Which stakeholders were involved in identifying needs and in the planning and design of the measure?

Community leaders, school leaders, teaching staff, learners, parents, and a Learner Council, which was established to give learners a voice. The community is comprised of local leaders, parents, and support services.

Who was involved in implementing the measure?

Local municipality, school leadership and teaching staff

Who has key responsibility for implementation?

The local municipality and schools.

How are the different people involved in implementation being supported (e.g. do they receive specific training?)

At the start of the process, the municipal Education Board decided that any changes implemented should be based on evidence from current research. Facilitating the use of research towards professional development by challenging attitudes and building on strengths. Time was arranged in the teaching staff schedules (from pre-school to adult education) to become aware of new research and adapt practice. Overviews of research literature were shared with all, and the relevance for the teachers' own knowledge and experiences was discussed.

Efforts were oriented towards supporting motivation for change. School leaders aimed to help teaching staff experience concrete success based on effort. The vision was promoted that 'every student and teacher should be a winner'. All achievements were recognised – beyond 'academic' ones, for both teachers and learners. School leaders also received training in effective use of staff skill and knowledge.

The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools also supports teaching staff. It has changed its approach to inspection based on finding "wrong doing" to one of counselling focused on how to improve functioning.

What have been the obstacles to introducing the measure? How have they been addressed?

One challenge was to help policy makers and school leaders understand the negative impact of certain teaching methods, and that segregating students were actually contributing to early school leaving. Schools in general are also challenged by a traditional Swedish culture of not supporting individuals to do something perceived as 'special or extraordinary'.

Observations made by independent researchers and counsellors, show that the change in culture has been about systematic professional learning at all levels, guided by a central political framework in combination with trust that the local school could develop its capability to support all learners towards realising their potential. The key seems to be just the creation of a community of searching, learning and acting, involving actors at all levels. These findings were strongly corroborated in another Swedish case looking at 12 municipalities working towards inclusive schools: namely that researchers disseminate "knowledge", but there needs to be a local creation of both "knowledge of action" (the reality) and "knowledge for action" (Sigurðardóttir et al 2017).

It was also a challenge to assist the special education students to overcome their negative perceptions of classrooms and feelings of stigmatisation. These student special education groups felt 'excluded', and that teachers had low expectations of them. Some school were official early school leavers from primary school; others were known as hallway ramblers- going to school but not attending lessons. Staff realised that more and more learners were being sent to "special education groups" and not returning to mainstream classes. To address these challenges, creative collaboration opportunities were organised by school leaders and between special education teachers and mainstream teachers to provide opportunities and training for them to work and teach together. This gave rise, over time, to increased levels of inclusion, student belonging and goal-achievement.

Another obstacle has been to sustain these transitions when changes in leadership and staff take place.

Is there a monitoring/evaluation system in place?

At the national level, the Swedish School Inspectorate makes inspections of all schools on a regular basis. Local school evaluations are also conducted.

Through in-depth studies and analyses, the Swedish Agency for Education evaluates schools to identify and highlight those areas where national development is needed.

What is monitored?

The Swedish Agency for Education analyses causes of variations in goal attainment among schools. At local level, school evaluation is mostly based on comparisons with the results of other schools in the municipality.

The evaluations of the Swedish School Inspectorate are based on visits to schools and the schools' self-evaluations.

The Essunga Municipality sought out independent researchers to pinpoint the root causes of unauthorised absence from school, examining and isolating key elements that make a difference in schools and classrooms in the work with all students. The process was monitored over a period of ten years (2007-2017).

Who monitors and how?

The Swedish School Inspectorate has monitored Essunga schools over a period of ten years and focused on questions of prevention and attendance. Data were collected through qualitative interviews with politicians, managers, headmasters, special educators, teachers, pupils, parents and other staff within the municipality's school activities. Observations of students took place in class settings, and that of teachers in classes and various meetings

Is further evaluation planned and when will the results be available?

The Swedish School Inspectorate performs regular inspections to monitor the quality of education provided. Moreover, schools prepare annual quality reports stating the objectives for the year, the measures taken, and an evaluation of progress made.

What has been the impact of the measure?

The measure has led to increased levels of inclusion a stronger focus on knowledge acquisition and better adaptation of teaching and learning for individual needs.

By 2010, the school had succeeded in attaining the Education Board's goal that all learners should pass all subjects. All the learners were also eligible for upper-secondary national programmes. In 2011, the national test results for ninth grade in mathematics, Swedish and English were even better than the year before. Only two learners left school without an upper-secondary qualification and 89% of learners passed grades in all subjects.

A ten-year long study, monitoring the process from 2007-2017, highlighted the sustainability of the measures implemented in producing consistently strong results.

Observations from researchers have suggested the importance of continually reinforcing, at all levels and for all stakeholders, the willingness, the awareness and the ability to question in the development of practice and research.

What resources are involved (material, space, amount of funding)? (text field)

Municipal funding.

Further info (website, contact person e-mail, organisation details) (text field)

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