This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Malmqvist, J. (2016)
Working successfully towards inclusion—or excluding pupils? A comparative retroductive study of three similar schools in their work with EBD.
*Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 21(4): 344-360
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2016.1201637

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-31234
Working successfully towards inclusion—or excluding pupils?  
A comparative retroductive study of three similar schools in their work with EBD

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Working successfully towards inclusion—or excluding pupils? A comparative retroductive study of three similar schools in their work with EBD

Sweden uses municipally run Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) for students displaying emotional behavioural difficulties (EBD). This study investigates one Swedish municipality where transfers of students to PRUs were related to school practices favouring either inclusion or exclusion. A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select three elementary schools with regard to their success (School A) or failure (B and C) in keeping pupils with problematic behaviours at school. These three schools are in catchment areas with similar socio-economic conditions. A mixed methods research design was combined with comparative case studies in a retroductive approach. School A had only one pupil transferred to a PRU in ten years, whereas such transfers from B and C were almost tenfold. School A distinguished itself from the other two schools by its number of inclusive qualities. This school succeeded in keeping almost all students without depriving other students of their rightful learning.

Keywords: inclusion; exclusion; special needs students; special education; mainstreaming
Introduction

During a visit to a pupil referral unit (PRU) in April 2010, an experienced PRU teacher remarked that some schools sent very few pupils to the PRU, whereas others sent many. This remark raised several important questions that were later explored in the research study discussed in this paper. A PRU, in the municipality where this investigation took place, is a small school setting governed by the municipality’s central administration. The facilities are separate from regular schools, and the pupils exhibiting severe emotional behavioural difficulties (EBD) come from all schools in the municipality.

The occurrence in the municipality of special settings (PRUs) for pupils with problematic behaviour is not surprising. Pupils considered as having severe emotional behavioural difficulties are removed from mainstream schools in most countries because schools find them very difficult to handle (Hornby and Evans 2014), and children exhibiting EBD are seen to pose one of the greatest challenges to inclusion (Evans et al. 2003). The use of exclusion has become a common strategy to deal with this challenge. Exclusion of pupils to PRUs is often used as a special educational needs provision, in clear conflict with the objective of inclusion (Jull 2008).

Farell et al. (2007, 142) emphasise that ‘there is no doubt that behavioural issues cause considerable concern among teachers’ and that these concerns ‘need to be taken seriously’. Farell et al. also state that pupils in mainstream schools who exhibit troubling behaviour and are ‘qualified’ for a special setting may have a negative impact on other pupils’ learning (cf. Hattie 2008).

The way schools work with pupils exhibiting behavioural difficulties is clearly related to the behaviour of pupils, especially when it concerns the use of teaching strategies, how special needs provision is provided, and how teachers behave (Cooper 2011, cf. Thomas 2014).
To sum up, how schools work is closely related to problematic behaviours among pupils and also to the exclusion of pupils from mainstream settings to PRUs. During visits to PRUs (April 2010), one experienced teacher said that she had the feeling that her PRU received more pupils from some schools than from others. Two important questions are whether working towards inclusion reduces severe behavioural problems among children and whether working towards inclusion prevents referrals to PRUs. The latter question refers to a key outcome of schooling and leads to the overall aim of the study, which is to investigate how transfers of pupils to PRUs are related to school practices in favour of either inclusion or exclusion in one Swedish municipality. Two research questions, related to two phases of the research design, are posed in pursuit of the aforesaid aim:

Research question 1

Are there any schools situated in the same Swedish municipality that have the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas but substantial long-term differences concerning exclusion rates to PRUs?

Research question 2

How do schools with the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas, but with substantial differences in exclusion rates to PRUs, work with special needs provision in relation to inclusion and exclusion?

Definition of inclusion

There is a well-known lack of consensus about how to define inclusion (e.g. McLeskey et al. 2014). In the present study full inclusion is regarded as one end of a continuum, with processes in schools located either towards or away from that end. This implies that there are always complex, dynamic, interrelated processes of inclusion and
exclusion in the social settings we call ‘schools’ (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou 2011; Hedegaard Hansen 2012). Hedegaard Hansen (2012) suggests that both processes should be investigated together. Another reason to use the concept of inclusion related to exclusion in this way is that it seems feasible to reach agreement about what (e.g. attitudes) is in favour of and what is against inclusion.

**Earlier research**

School effectiveness research related to behaviour has been sparse, but there has been ‘widespread acceptance of the idea that schools make a difference when it comes to behaviour’, despite the lack of evidence (Thomas 2014, 34, cf. Evans et al. 2003). Studies have shown mixed results concerning school placements in regular schools compared with placements in special schools in relation to academic outcomes and/or effects on pupils’ behaviour (Ruijs and Peetsmaa 2009). A recent review (Brørup Dyssegard and Søgaard Larsen 2013) showed that there have been difficulties in establishing the requirements of successful inclusion and in establishing which interventions work for students’ academic attainment and social development. Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) also found mixed results in their review about the effect of inclusive education for students with mild or moderate behavioural difficulties concerning learning or psychosocial issues. Research on the effects of inclusion on the academic achievement of peers without special educational needs is sparse (Farrell et al. 2007; Loreman 2014).

Inconsistencies in terminology about students with special educational needs is a complicating factor when trying to establish the present status of knowledge concerning inclusion and behavioural difficulties (Ruijs and Peetsma 2009). Ruijs and Peetsma
found it often unclear which students had been investigated in the studies covered by their review.

PRUs contain students exhibiting the most challenging and inappropriate behaviours, and this kind of placement is a form of exclusion from regular schools that may become permanent and lead ‘into a trajectory of long-term deep exclusion’ (Daniels and Cole 2010, 129). Interestingly, there seems to be a shortage of studies with educational outcomes from schools that show their actual ability to prevent exclusion of their students to segregated settings. A recent review by Loreman (2014) reporting different kinds of outcomes contains not a single reference to exclusion outcomes, even though the review emphasises that inclusion requires that ‘students must first be present in the available education contexts’ (469).

To sum up, there are disputes about how to define inclusion as well as problems in defining behavioural difficulties. As a consequence, there are substantial challenges in establishing the present knowledge from research studies in these areas. There is also a shortage of information about what is required for successful inclusion (Brørup Dyssegard and Søgaard Larsen 2013), as well as, certainly, a lack of knowledge about how inclusive educational practices can prevent pupils—exhibiting behavioural difficulties or not—from being excluded from schools. It is hoped that the research design used in the present study, together with a clear strategy to deal practically with the elusive inclusion concept, will contribute to important knowledge about conditions for inclusion.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study is based on an elaboration of a model originally used by Alan Dyson that was further developed by Persson (1998) and
Emanuelsson, Rosenqvist and Persson (2001, cf. Emanuelsson 2001). Two contrasting perspectives, the categorical and the relational, constitute the model and represent exclusion and inclusion, respectively. These perspectives resemble the basic perspectives often used within the field of special needs education (Nilholm 2006). The categorical perspective is in line with other labels such as *deficit perspective* (Ainscow 1998). It favours the use of special provision in excluded settings where students “having” school difficulties go for remedia-
tion. The relational perspective, on the other hand, emphasises a variety of factors that potentially cause educational difficulties, factors such as conditions in the school environment or socio-economic/structural inequalities (Göransson, Malmqvist and Nilholm 2013). It favours changes in the school environment to support students experiencing school difficulties and to prevent exclusion (cf. Emanuelsson 2001).

The categorical (C) and relational (R) perspectives have the following characteristics along five dimensions in the elaborated model used in this study:

1. Reasons for special educational needs

   o *Students with difficulties*: difficulties are innate or otherwise bound to the individual (C)

   o *Students in difficulties*: difficulties arise from different phenomena in educational settings and processes (R)

2. Focus for special educational activities

   o *Students* (C)

   o *Students and the learning environment*, where teachers are an important part of the learning environment (R)
3. Responsibility for special educational activities

- **Specialists**: special educational teachers and student social welfare staff
  
- **Generalists**: work units of teachers and staff with active support from the principal

4. Implications for provision

- **special provision**: support most often provided in segregated settings

- **Inclusive provision**: support provided in regular classrooms

5. Time perspective in education and with special support

- **Short-term**

- **Long-term**

**Method**

**Research design**

A mixed methods approach (Creswell 2009) combined with a retroductive approach has been used together with comparative case studies on three schools. A research design with a retroductive approach implies a reverse way to examine effects. The effects, with underlying causes, have already taken place. The effects need to be found and thoroughly examined (Byrne 2011, 81):

It is important to emphasize that our account of causality is based on a retroductive approach. We observe what has happened and attempt to generate an account of
why it has happened. So we necessarily start from the effect — from what is, and go backwards to the best explanation which seems to fit the facts.

The research design has two interrelated phases, where the first phase of the design answers the first research question, followed by a second phase that answers the second research question. A retroductive approach (Byrne 2011) means here that if an intriguing finding—schools with the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas but different exclusion rates to PRUs—is found during the first phase, then this finding requires an explanation, or an answer to the question ‘why?’ In the following (second) phase, an investigation is made ‘to generate an account of why it has happened’ (Byrne 2011, 81), that is, to generate an account of why the finding from phase 1 obtains. The second research question, which is related to the second phase of the investigation, asks how such schools, if found, work with special needs provision in relation to inclusion and exclusion. The answer to the second research question is then further analysed as an explanation for the results of the first phase of the investigation.

The sequential design (figure 1) describes the two phases and the different parts constituting the study. Figure 1 also shows the temporal order and what data and analyses predominate (capital letters) in relation to the objectives of this study. Lower case letters indicate subordinate parts (Creswell 2009).
Phase 1

Estimates of statistical data, including school size over 10 years (number of pupils enrolled each year, 2001–2010), together with the numbers of referrals to PRUs (de-identified data) from all schools in the municipality were used in phase 1.

Estimates of relative frequency for each school, that is, the number of referrals divided by the total number of pupils enrolled in each school over 10 years, were made to enable comparisons between schools.

The purpose was to identify schools with huge differences in relative frequency of referrals to PRUs but similarities in other aspects. These other aspects were school size (number of pupils over 10 years), grades (primary or secondary schools), location (city, outside of the city centre, suburban or countryside) and, in particular, socio-economic conditions in each school’s catchment area. The municipality provided, for all its catchment areas, socio-economic figures, which the municipality uses to adjust for differences between different school areas. These adjustments are based on educational level among parents, family income, number of immigrants, etc. Based on the socio-economic figure, a school receives a certain amount of money, per pupil, in addition to the base amount each pupil is entitled to within the municipality. The socio-economic
figures used are from 2010, when, in addition to the base amount, a student in the wealthiest area received £190 and a student in the poorest area £1100.

Three schools were found to meet the criteria and were selected for case studies in a purposeful sampling procedure (Creswell 2013). They are subject to the same local regulations, which state that referrals to PRUs are allowed only after extensive measures have been taken to improve the school situation and the school has nevertheless been unsuccessful. A central unit (special pedagogical support unit) within the municipality monitors all the schools’ efforts and provides guidance in order to prevent referrals.

Despite the three schools’ commonalities, they showed substantial differences in their relative frequency of pupils being referred to a PRU. Therefore, an intriguing finding of differences between these three schools’ exclusion rates was found, answering research question 1 in the affirmative and prompting a ‘Why?’ in phase 1. This finding will be thoroughly described in the results section.

Phase 2

Qualitative data

Three semi-structured (Kvale 1997) group interviews were conducted in each school with the principal (P1) and the vice principal (P2), two Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (S1, S2; qualified teacher plus 18 months of advanced-level study required to become a SENCo in Sweden) and two teachers (T1, T2), for a total of 18 interviewees (figure 1, box 4). The average length of the interviews was 66 minutes. Respondents were asked to view themselves as representing the whole school and were therefore repeatedly asked to convey what they viewed as being characteristic of their schools and of different teacher teams at their schools. The two central themes in the interviews were how the school and teacher teams (i.e. groups of teachers responsible
Four separate interviews were also conducted with staff working at the central special pedagogical support unit in the municipality. These respondents have thorough knowledge of the schools (figure 1, boxes 3 and 8). These interviews were carried out to get a second opinion and to obtain additional information about contextual conditions from neutral respondents. An unorthodox method was used for these interviews in order to protect the schools from being identified. Each respondent was handed a list with twenty schools in alphabetical order. There was a minimum of interaction between interviewer and respondent to prevent the respondents’ identifying which schools were selected as case studies. The main question central support unit staff were asked at all four interviews was whether the staff at each of the 20 schools expressed an ambition to keep all their pupils or, rather, showed an inclination or preference to refer pupils to PRUs.

In the last two interviews (box 8), interviewees were additionally asked to describe in more detail why they had those opinions about the schools and to describe decisions and priorities they knew had been made in each school. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data was also obtained from open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

The main objective of the qualitative data analysis was to examine in what regard school A was described as being different in comparison with schools B and C. An interpretative perspective of meaning was used, with the three schools constituting the unit of analysis (Kvale 1997). The analysis was directed towards identifying and examining aspects that in some way could be assumed to be related to processes towards a relational perspective (and inclusion) or, conversely, towards a categorical
perspective (and exclusion). These aspects were identified through a process in several steps, beginning with identifying meaning units and then making condensed descriptions while keeping the core meaning intact.

Quantitative data

Data assembled from the questionnaires (figure 1, boxes 6 and 7) and results from national tests in grade 5 in three subjects (boxes 9 and 10) were used.

The questionnaires directed to principals and teachers were completed during school visits. The questions focused on conditions in the school and, in teacher teams, on their work with behavioural difficulties (e.g. resources, priorities, experiences, challenges, teaching strategies, attitudes). The internal loss of data was very small, as each respondent was asked individually to thoroughly check whether all questions had been answered when the questionnaires were handed in.

A descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data was done, with cross-tabulation as the most-used analytical tool (response rates School A/82%, B/86%, C/80%, n = 109, box 7 in figure 1).

Concluding analysis

An overarching, concluding comparative case analysis was carried out on all data from the two phases (figure 1, box 11). A contrast table (Miles and Huberman 1994) based on the theoretical framework in this study was used to aggregate differences within different aspects for each school. The different results for different aspects are positioned based on their relation to the relational perspective (inclusive) or the categorical perspective (exclusive).
Validity

The study was designed to obtain triangulated validation of data. The interview data from staff at the central support unit were largely in accordance with the data from the schools (from interviews and questionnaires). The staff from the central support unit reported less information about one of the selected schools (A) than about the other two (B and C). This seems natural, as there is plausibly a strong relation between the amount of their acquired information and the number of referral processes they had worked with at each school.

None of the school respondents were informed about the strategy behind choosing the school or why their school had been chosen, as this would have jeopardised the validity.

There were very few questions (almost none) from respondents when the questionnaires were approached. Several respondents told the researcher that it was easy to understand the questions and the multiple choices in the questionnaire.

The statistics used (relative frequency of placements in PRUs and national test results in Swedish, English and mathematics) are retrospective results not affected by the researcher.

After the report was published in December 2012 (Malmqvist 2012), principals from all three schools declared informally that the descriptions and results resembled their schools appropriately.

Ethical considerations

All participants in the study were informed about the aim of the study, that participation was voluntary and that they could end their participation at any time. They were further informed that data would be handled confidentially and that the schools would be
described in a way that would make it difficult for a reader to identify them. For that reason, the number of staff at the schools is not given here, and percentages have been used in the presentation of results from the questionnaire.

Results

Phase 1

The statistics from the municipality revealed vastly different rates of exclusion (i.e. referrals to PRUs) from the schools in the municipality. Three primary schools (grades 1–6) were found in the middle of the list of schools ordered by socio-economic conditions. They were within a range of £100, which means that the socio-economic conditions in these three schools’ catchment areas were almost the same. They were situated in very similar kinds of suburban areas, and the number of their pupils was very similar (slightly less than 3000 enrolled over the ten-year period for one school and very close to 3500 pupils for the other two schools). A significant result was that School A had only one referral (relative frequency, 0.0003), whereas Schools B and C had ten and nine, respectively (0.003 in round numbers for both schools) over the ten years. The estimated range for all 46 schools was 0–0.0084. The figure 0 means that no referrals were made, a situation found mainly among a small number of very small schools. Most of them had less than 50 pupils enrolled on average over the ten-year period. One larger school, situated in a very affluent catchment area and with 309 pupils on average per year over the ten-year period, belonged to this group of schools. The school with nearly one percent (0.0084) of its pupils referred to PRUs was situated in a low-income catchment area. The statistics showed that the number of referrals from schools was strongly related to socio-economic conditions in the catchment areas. The main finding in phase 1 was that three schools (A, B and C) with so many commonalities, where the
most important of these is socio-economic conditions in the catchment area, had substantial differences in regard to referrals to PRUs. This finding answered the first research question in the affirmative and also raised, as has been described before, the question ‘Why?’.

**Phase 2**

Several important results from questionnaires, school interviews and central staff interviews do not easily fit into the contrast table based on Persson’s (1998) and Emanuelsson et al.’s (2001) theoretical models. These results are positioned in the beginning section for each school. They are chosen because they contribute to a fuller description of the schools and also convey the disparate characters of the schools. They are followed by examples of empirical findings related to either the categorical or the relational perspective. These examples, short citations from school interviews, were positioned in contrast tables during the analysis. They are chosen because they represent the dominant views and thinking within the schools.

Results from the schools in this second phase provide essential information for answering research question 2; how schools with the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas, but with substantial differences in exclusion rates to PRUs, work with special needs provision in relation to inclusion and exclusion. These results are eventually summed up as profiles in table 4. The results help us to understand the differences in exclusion rates, between the three schools with almost the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas, obtained in the first phase.

The last section contains fifth grade test results from each school.

*School A*

Questionnaire
The answers on the questionnaire from the staff in school A showed a response pattern indicating a common, whole-school policy, with few exceptions, concerning inclusion and attitudes towards pupils exhibiting behavioural difficulties. One of the questions concerned the use of segregated settings (separate from the regular classroom) for students exhibiting behavioural problems. Only a small percentage (8%) of the respondents in school A agreed with this solution (table 1).

| Table 1. Percentage of staff advocating segregated school placements for children exhibiting behavioural problems |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                                  | School A | School B | School C |
| Agree with segregated settings                   | 8%       | 27%       | 39%       |

All respondents in school A were positive toward these children being prioritised when resources are distributed within the school, and there is no single comment in the comment field that these priorities must be under certain conditions (table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Percentage of priorities among staff in the three schools on question whether EBD children should be prioritised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very strong priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

100% 100% 100%
There were no other comments, in any of the comment fields in the questionnaire, where negative attitudes were expressed towards problematic behaviour or inclusion in school A.

School interviews

There had been continuity in leadership in school A (more than 10 years with the same principal), and more than half of the staff in school A had been hired by the principal.

There were several detailed descriptions of students displaying behavioural difficulties from the three school-A interviews. These examples provided a clear picture of how contacts with the central special pedagogical support unit in the municipality were made and of how the school had solved problematic situations without referrals to PRUs. ‘The teacher teams organise their work in the classroom around the pupil exhibiting behavioural difficulties, making sure that the situation will be good for every child, and this requires extensive planning and one helluva structure’ (P2).

Several conditions were emphasised in the interviews as necessary to make working in this way possible. One was described by one SENCo (S1): ‘The idea is that every teacher team shall be organized to contain competencies and knowledge to work with all pupils’. Two other conditions emphasised in all interviews were collaboration beyond the teacher teams, including all teachers in the school in the job of dealing with behavioural problems, and flexibility in allocating resources.

The interviewees said that they had received praise from the central special pedagogical support unit: ‘They told us that we work in absolutely the right way’ (T2), which results in a situation where ‘our students are never sent to PRUs’ (T1). The staff expressed mixed feelings about this situation. They said they were proud of their work but simultaneously aware that this led to disadvantages when it came to resources.
Referrals to PRUs would have saved a lot of resources and would have made the work easier.

During the interviews all respondents from school A expressed the view that keeping the pupils in the school was a better option for the pupils. None of the respondents were positive about PRUs. The principal said that they sometimes needed guidance from the central special pedagogical support unit and help with evaluation of how they worked. The principal emphasised that the school had received several students from the PRUs, students who had refused to go back to the schools they once belonged to.

The children who had started in the school ‘must be here as far as possible, as this is very much about attitudes’ (P1). This view was shared by the staff in school A, according to the three interviews. The principal was asked to describe this further: ‘I am fully aware that this is due to my own values and the way I work. … As I am in the position to make decisions and have the responsibility, I obviously want my values to permeate the school I am in charge of; otherwise I do not want to stay if I only meet resistance and the staff do not believe in me’.

The school had a clearly stated policy. It was described by the principal and the vice principal, who said, almost in chorus, ‘the right of all children to be here and to learn, a people’s house, a summer house, a greenhouse’. This policy was also expressed on the school’s website.

One of the SENCos said that they (both SENCos) had full support to work toward inclusion, that the staff worked accordingly and that this inclusive school culture was established several years ago by the principal. ‘The principal stated from the first day that if the special education teachers wanted to continue to work at the school they had to work within the regular classrooms with special needs provision’ (S1).
Exceptions were made when there was a risk of a dangerous situation, but such exceptions had several restrictions (e.g. could be only temporary solutions).

*Contrast table school A*

**Reasons for special educational needs**

One SENCo (S1) as well as both teachers emphasised the change of perspective when the principal began working at the school. Teacher 1 said it was

‘a huge change of perspective when our principal came to our school, from focusing on Peter’s fault we instead had to make sure that Peter was in a good mood’ (T1).

**Focus of special educational activities**

One SENCo (S1) described how the school worked with behavioural issues. The main principle was that the EBD pupil’s situation should be the point of departure for teaching, for everyone’s benefit.

‘…done after my mapping of the school situation, for the teachers to organise their teaching based on this (EBD) pupil’s situation in order to make the teaching successful for everybody else in the classroom’ (S1).

**Responsibility for special educational activities**

It was reported in all interviews that the teachers/teacher teams should take the main responsibility for special support. The vice principal said that the teachers no longer
expected somebody to come in with a magic wand to fix the problems. Teacher 2 described the current situation in relation to how it was before:

‘…a changed view for about ten years; before that you shouted for help, but after that [the change] they said “no, this is your task”, and you eventually learned that this is your own responsibility within the teacher team’ (T2).

**Implications for provision**

The interviews showed a consistency about the goal to find solutions for working with EBD pupils in the regular classrooms. Co-teaching was described in all interviews:

‘We keep them in the classroom so they don’t feel that there is something different about them, that [they feel] they are part of the group, and we try to have two teachers in the classroom to make this work’ (T1).

**Time perspective**

The school emphasised the importance of a proactive perspective and had developed routines and strategies accordingly. For example, the school had individual development plans for every child from when they started kindergarten:

– Do other schools work this way? (Interviewer)

– No, this is my own constructed model because it is important to follow every child’s progress (P).

**Central unit interviews**

The school had asked for guidance on several occasions over the years. A description from one of the interviews (box 8) clearly highlights school A’s ambition to keep all its students: ‘I supported the school for a whole year, as it was a complicated case. The school eventually succeeded in keeping the child, who never lost contact with
his peers. It was a job well done’. This ambition to keep the children was evident in two more interviews, while the fourth person had almost no experiences from school A. In two interviews it was stated that the principal was engaged in the contacts with the central support unit.

School B

Questionnaire

The answers from school B show that 27% of the staff were in agreement with segregated settings for children exhibiting behavioural problems (table 1). The majority were positive that priorities were made for this group of children (table 2). But 22% had reservations about those priorities, expressing contrasting opinions in the comment field (e.g. ‘The problem is that other children will get worse as the resources are taken away from them’).

Thirteen percent of the questionnaires contained negative comments about inclusion or positive comments about exclusion, such as ‘I am in favour of using exclusion measures for some pupils’.

School interviews

School B had changed principals several times over the ten-year period.

In all three interviews, only positive things were said about the PRUs. The principal repeatedly stated that it was impossible to manage more than 99% of the pupils in the school. The principal referred to acute situations when there were not enough resources to manage all pupils: ‘There is a hurry when a pupil suddenly hits another pupil severely’.

The teachers said that there was a lack of collaboration between teachers and that they knew little about how other teachers worked with pupils: ‘We don’t know
what happens inside the classroom, and if you get too tired, regardless of your understanding, you are only human, and then you say “Enough!” (single hard clap of the hands) (T1). Both teachers said that it is not possible to keep some of the pupils in the school and that those pupils should have specialists working with them in the PRUs instead.

The situation could have been better according to the two SENCos. There were substantial differences between the teacher teams in how they worked, and some teachers refused advice or guidance from the SENCos ‘because they say they have 22 other pupils to handle’ (S1), ‘they won’t listen at all; they just keep working according to their own theories’ (S2) and ‘they don’t believe us when we say that their way of working is related to the difficulties they meet in the classroom’ (S1). Both SENCos expressed serious doubts about how the school works with emotional and behavioural difficulties: ‘We doubt if our school works in the right way’ (S2); ‘The class teachers don’t get much support from their colleagues, and they have to stand very much alone, even if we are there to support them’; and ‘To be blunt, the special provision that’s available depends on the principal’s view’ (S1).

There was no stated policy on the school’s website about inclusion.

Contrast table school B

Reasons for special educational needs

The interviewees frequently referred to problems that the pupils brought to school. Neuropsychiatric diagnoses were often in focus and regarded as the reasons for those problems:
‘Often there are problems with ADHD, or at least ADHD is likely, and other such problems, but we are not always sure [about diagnoses], as some parents object to evaluations’ (T1).

Focus for special educational activities

The two SENCos repeatedly described their struggle with working towards inclusion and the problems they faced with many teachers at the school:

‘Many teachers want someone else to take them [EBD pupils] away, a view we work hard to change, but we have not come far with this’ (both laughing) (S2).

Responsibility for special educational activities

The interviewees all agreed with how the majority of the teachers regarded the responsibility for working with EBD pupils. They wanted specialists to take the responsibility:

‘They must have people who are specialised in working with these kinds of problems … and have their schooling somewhere else. Nearby there is a “doggie day care” [where dogs go while their owners work] space for lease—no, I’m just kidding’ (giggles) (T1).

Implications for provision

School B had organised special support in special education groups:

‘We have special education teachers for every grade, even if they don’t have formal special education teaching credentials, and they work very well with small special education groups’ (P1).
Time perspective

The two SENCos described a lack of initiative when school problems are identified. They said that valuable time was wasted while they waited for external (psychiatric) evaluations of pupils:

‘We can easily get passive during long periods when evaluations of pupils are being done’ (S2).

Central unit interviews

Three of the respondents had thorough knowledge of school B. One described the school as not working towards inclusion but also said, ‘At least the SENCos seem to have an inclusive view, according to my experience’. One of the other respondents said, ‘I know they have been organising special groups instead of providing special support within the classrooms’. The third respondent said, ‘I have worked at this school on several occasions, and I was really disappointed recently, when one pupil was referred to the PRU. It should not have gone that far’.

School C

Questionnaire

The answers from school B show that 39% of the staff agreed with segregated settings for children exhibiting behavioural problems (table 1). The majority approved of prioritising this group of children (table 2), but 11% expressed reservations about it in the comment field, revealing contrasting opinions (e.g. ‘Such priorities mean that other children will get worse and have fewer opportunities. Not ok!’).
Eleven percent of the questionnaires had comments that showed positive attitudes to exclusion or negative attitudes to inclusion/integration: ‘The whole class and the EBD child suffer in integration’.

School interviews

There had been several changes of principals over the ten-year period.

The principal, the SENCos and the teachers advocated the need for PRUs on the basis that the school ‘cannot sort out these things’ (P1). The principal said the PRUs were important because ‘we simply cannot change all staff when it concerns competence, views, attitudes’. The SENCos expressed concern about the situation for other children: ‘We can’t manage pupils with such severe difficulties because we also have several other children with needs who deserve a good school situation’ (S1).

The principal said, ‘We are obliged to work towards inclusion, but…’. This was said in a way that indicated that the principal did not view inclusion as important.

Problems with behavioural issues occurred very suddenly in school C, according to the interviews, and work with these problems was repeatedly called ‘firefighting’. The principal described in depth one teacher’s excellent work with behavioural issues, and she was described as being ‘an exception’. There were also substantial differences between teacher teams, which, according to the principal, had much to do with traditions in some teams—‘the view that some of the children shouldn’t be here at all but should be at the PRUs’.

Both SENCos described differences between teacher teams: ‘Most of them function well, but it’s strange that some teams always say they’ve got the difficult children in their classes, and some teacher teams never get difficult children’ (S1). ‘Yes, this really gets you worried’ (S2). Yet, both SENCos expressed a strong medicalised view regarding the causes of behavioural difficulties.
One of the teachers said that there was no collaboration between teachers and that ‘we have different views on behavioural difficulties and whether the children are problems or not’ (T1). The allocation of resources was also problematic, according to the teacher: ‘If we’ve got a resource, then you sort of hold on to it, which is the tradition here. We should be much more flexible’. On the question of whether the teacher expressed the need for help from others, the teacher said, ‘No, no, I don’t think I’d get help from the other teachers, but some support from the SENCos; but the way it works here is that if I’ve got a resource, then it’s mine—that’s our tradition, which is sad’.

The SENCos were asked to give examples of pupils exhibiting behavioural difficulties where the school had been able to keep the pupil in the school. Some answers were as follows: ‘Many other children also have needs, and few of us have the competence to make the situation good’ (S1); ‘These huge difficulties in children don’t wear off’ (S1); and ‘The only time these difficulties go away is when the child leaves the school’ (S2).

There was no policy about inclusion on the school’s website.

Contrast table school C

Reasons for special educational needs

The EBD pupils and their behaviours were seen as being the problem in the three interviews. The behaviours were considered to be a dominant part of the children’s personalities, with no mention made of other explanations or causes:

‘You can manage most children, but not these “acting out social disorders” rampaging through the school; they fight and do all kinds of things’ (P1).

Focus for special educational activities
The strategy to deal with EBD pupils was to change their behaviours; the interviews contained no indication that the regular teaching was supposed to be changed:

‘You need to have a physical person who works very closely with the student, closely monitoring the child’s behaviour, and helping the child to behave’ (S2).

Responsibility for special educational activities

According to the principals and the SENCos, the majority of the teachers and teacher teams had the opinion that they were not responsible for EBD pupils:

‘Different traditions are behind the differences between the teacher teams. Some have got used to the view that someone else should take care of these children’ (smiles and winks) (P1).

Implications for provision

The school had a system with a large number of special education groups:

‘We all [SENCos and special teachers] are connected to different classes and work with these children in special education groups’ (S1).

Time perspective

The often-mentioned ‘firefighting situations’, together with reports of slow reactions, are illustrative of the time perspective in school C:

– So there are differences between the teacher teams? (Interviewer)

– Yes, oh yes [both laugh]. The differences are huge, and they also wait too long to act in some teams, so the problems become permanent (S1).

Central unit interviews
Two of the respondents had sound knowledge of school C, and they both expressed concerns about the school: ‘Yes, we get many applications for referrals, and it makes me worried about the way the school works’. The other respondent said, ‘Every time I work there, I feel like, “oh, there is a lot of work to be done here with special needs provision”’.

**Contrast table characterising the schools’ perspectives**

Interview data from the three schools reveal two distinct and opposite profiles, as shown in table 3. They show the dominating perspective in each school. This does not mean that the opinions are uniform within the three schools. The two SENCos in School B, for example, clearly advocated a relational perspective. They had, however, substantial difficulties to work accordingly, as the school as a whole did not support this perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Categorical perspective</th>
<th>Empirical findings</th>
<th>Relational perspective</th>
<th>Empirical findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reasons for special educational needs</td>
<td>Students with difficulties.</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>Students in difficulties.</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focus for special educational activities</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>Student and the learning environment</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responsibility for special educational activities</td>
<td>Specialists</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>Generalists</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Implications for provision</td>
<td>Special provision</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>Inclusive provision</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Time perspective</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Test results from schools A, B and C

Swedish authorities made schools’ testing results public in 2007 (database SiRiS/Skolverket). Official statistics from 2007 through 2010 concerning fifth grade test results from 29 national tests within three subjects (Swedish, English, and mathematics) have been used to compare schools A, B and C. The test results show the percentage of pupils in each school who reached the pass-level in each test in grade 5. The test results from school A are on the same level as those from schools B and C (table 4).

Table 4. Mean goal attainment on national tests in grade 5, percentage of children reaching pass level based on results from 29 sub tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swedish - 11 sub tests</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English - 9 sub tests</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics - 9 sub tests</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Phase 1

The results from phase 1 clearly showed that there exist substantial differences in exclusion rates (referrals of pupils to PRUs) from regular schools within the municipality. This was expected, but more importantly, the statistics also showed substantial differences between three schools with the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas. These differences between the three schools have remained stable over a long time period. This answers the first research question.
As emphasised earlier, the three schools must comply with the same local policies, as they belong to the same jurisdiction. It is also important to note that these three schools also had several other commonalities (e.g. school size) and were situated in municipality areas with very similar conditions (e.g. the same kind of suburban area).

It should also be noted that the municipality has no register showing how many students have special educational needs due to behavioural difficulties in each school. The prevalence, or a school’s gauging of the prevalence, of behavioural difficulties, however, depends on whether the school can successfully prevent or manage such difficulties, so even if the municipality had such a register, it would be very difficult to draw any firm conclusions based on it. The same situation applies for the prevalence of neuropsychiatric diagnoses such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Both diagnoses imply behavioural difficulties. The occurrence of these diagnoses is clearly related to school factors (Harwood and Allan 2014; Hinshaw and Scheffler).

All data showed that the reasons for the differences in exclusion rates were to be found inside the schools and not inside the pupils.

**Phase 2**

In looking for causes for the differences in exclusion rates between the three schools with almost the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas, the focus in the second research question was on how the schools worked with special needs provision in relation to inclusion and exclusion. Several important findings emerged. School A worked in a completely different way compared to schools B and C with regard to behavioural difficulties. This is the main result that needs to be discussed more in depth.
It is important to note that school A had not been involved in any kind of intervention. The teachers had not received any kind of in-service training to cope with behavioural difficulties, nor had there been any additional resources, competencies or support available for the school. If anything, school A had an economic disadvantage in that it is economically favourable to have pupils referred to PRUs. The school’s accomplishments over the ten-year period had not been noted by the municipality or anyone else. There had been no follow-ups or evaluations that in any way investigated regular schools’ work with behavioural issues. School A’s work has been done on the quiet—below the radar, so to speak.

There were no results from school A that revealed that the school had developed or used any kind of special teaching techniques indicating a group-specific pedagogy (Norwich and Lewis 2007) for children exhibiting behavioural difficulties. There were no results pointing at the use of therapeutic approaches based on psychology (Cooper 2011). According to the data, school A had been using traditional teaching methods, and it seems that, in words taken from the Salamanca statement, the school had been using ‘the proven principles of sound pedagogy’ (UNESCO 1994, 7), rather than any special methods.

The second research question is about how the schools, with the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas but substantial differences in exclusion rates to PRUs, work with special needs provision in relation to inclusion and exclusion. As the results section revealed, there are a large number of differences in the ways the schools work, for example, concerning organisation (special class system only in B and C) and the organisation of teacher teams (special needs competence in all A’s teacher teams) and in how the SENCos work (with clear mandates in A and C but not in B) as well as in SENCos expressed perspectives (relational in A and B but not in C). The
latter example shows that there are different views within schools as well. It is, however, only in school A, according to the data, that the staff can be deemed to have a whole-school policy towards inclusion, as there is only a very small minority opposing this inclusive view, in contrast to schools B and C (even if the majority in these two schools support inclusion). These examples partially answer the second question. Together with most of the other results (see results section) from phase 2, they seem to explain both the ‘Why?’ and the related, second research question rather convincingly. Several of the results are obviously related to the overall aim of this study and to the apparent inclusive ethos that distinguishes school A from schools B and C. But where does this inclusive ethos come from?

**Plausible explanations**

Probably the most important things that distinguish school A from the other two schools are broad aspects of collaboration and a whole-school policy with a commitment to working towards inclusion. School A has, according to the data, developed an inclusive ethos, one in which values related to inclusion are clearly articulated and under which the school is organised in order to work towards inclusion (cf. Thomas 2014). This ethos—the presence of which is supported by data revealing a dominant relational perspective—has had a huge impact on decisions and priorities about how behavioural difficulties shall be handled. This ethos seems to reflect an underlying, local, school ideology (Göransson et al. 2013).

The three interviews in school A clearly point in the direction of the principal’s being the instigator of the work towards inclusion. This is further supported by the interviews. These showed that the principal initiated changes in the organisation and in thinking towards inclusion. However, this probably would not have been possible if the
staff had not accepted such new direction. This may be considered as an example of the chicken-or-the-egg dilemma: it raises the question, Did the arrival of the principal affect the values among the staff, or were those inclusive values already in place? One interpretation is that at least a majority of the staff already shared the same values as the principal from an early stage of the principal’s employment. The principal declared in the interview that it would not be possible to continue to work as principal if the staff did not share his/her view. It is clear from the interviews that the principal managed to change how the staff worked with special needs support and to change the staff’s views. From the view of new institutionalism theory, these changes in the school would not have been possible without discussions and bargaining between the principal and staff, where power issues are ubiquitous facts in what is described by Meyer and Rowan (2006, 7) as ‘interest-based struggle’. It is likely, in other words, that there was some initial conflict, especially with special education teachers who were used to working outside the classrooms. But at the same time, there seems to have been enough teachers to support the work towards inclusion. It is possible that the great need to employ new teachers made it easier to implement values, as the principal replaced half of the staff over the ten years. It seems obvious that looking for shared values must have been an important part in the process of recruiting new teachers, given that values are strongly emphasised in interviews and on the school’s website.

Conclusions

The school results related to work towards either inclusion (school A) or exclusion (schools B and C) focus on a very small minority of children in school. Pupils ‘with’ EBD are, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, regarded as one of the greatest challenges to inclusion (Evans et al. 2003). These children are often described as having behavioural difficulties that may be viewed by some as personal traits. The
results from this study indicate, however, that the number of children viewed as having behaviour problems and thus facing the risk of being excluded is closely related to the quality of their schools regarding work with special needs education. This was possible to discover using the retroductive comparative approach. It provided unequivocal outcomes of inclusion via exclusion rates as it revealed schools with almost the same socio-economic conditions in their catchment areas but substantial long-term differences concerning exclusion rates to PRUs. This answered the first research question in the affirmative and also prompted a ‘Why?’.

In the investigation to find out why the exclusion rates were different, the descriptions from the case studies made it explicit that school A worked strongly towards inclusion in their work with special needs provision, but schools B and C did not. This answered the second research question. Furthermore, it became clear that the accomplishments of school A in its work towards inclusion, at the same time as preventing deep exclusion (Daniels and Cole, 2010), had been achieved without any indication that it had negatively affected academic goal attainment among peers.

The results from this study, completed in an era when behavioural difficulties are most often seen as behavioural difficulties within children (Thomas 2014), call for a redirection of focus from individuals’ behaviours to educational factors. More precisely, the approach used in this study, coming at causality backwards (Byrne 2011), resulted in important educational findings of differences between schools. School A, especially, with its use of inclusive-related practices, provides a convincing example to learn from in work towards inclusion and in preventing EBD.
References


