

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS DIRECTED AT STUDENTS IN NEED OF SPECIAL SUPPORT: A STUDY OF SCHOOL WEBSITE PRESENTATION

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to explore how 55 Swedish independent schools, directed at (or limited to) students in need of special support (SNSS), describe their organisation, work and visions. The empirical data of the research consisted of the schools' website presentations, which were processed and analysed in consecutive steps. The results showed that the students' complicated school- and life situations were often combined with disabilities mainly in the neuropsychiatric field. The majority of the schools (76%) practiced both schooling and methods for treatment and care, differentiating their role from the mainstream track. Neuropsychiatric and psychological perspectives had a significant influence, reflected in how the schools describe their daily routines, therapeutic methods of treatment and access to specific categories of staff. Small groups, individual instruction and competent staff were described as specific features. Teaching content and didactic aspects were seldom highlighted. The focus on the websites was on socialisation and subjectification while qualification, i.e. knowledge development, had a more limited role. The study points to a need for further research exploring daily pedagogical practice in more depth and calls for a greater focus on student perspectives. Consequences for learning contexts are discussed in the concluding part of the article. The specialist role, the independent schools in the present study tended to take on are most urgent issues to discuss in an educational context striving for equity and inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: inclusive education, independent schools, students in need of special support, treatment methods, website presentation.

Introduction

For some decades, independent Swedish schools have been able to conduct schooling *directed* at students in need of special support (henceforth SNSS) although, in many cases it is also possible for such schools to admit other students. The Education Act of 2010 gave independent schools the right to *limit* their activities to SNSS, which at present also applies to upper secondary schools (SFS, 2010: 800, chapter 10, 35§, chapter 15, 33§). All Swedish schools are expected to achieve educational goals. However, statistics on study results show

that goal achievement in independent schools with limited student admission is considerably lower than mainstream comprehensive schools as a whole. According to the Education Act, students should be given special support within the teaching group that “the student normally belongs to” (SFS, 2010: 800, chapter 3, 7§, 11§) as long as there are no other special reasons for not doing so.

Questions about differentiation have been, and still are, central in discussions about all-encompassing or separated schools both nationally and internationally (Persson & Persson, 2016). Opening schools to a diversity of students challenges regular/mainstream schools as well as alternative educational contexts (Andersson, 2017; Ifous, 2015; Kotte, 2017). A key question is how learning difficulties might be understood (Ainscow, 1998; Haug, 1998; Nilholm, 2012) and how teaching in independent and public schools could be organised so that students see themselves as participants in engaged learning and agents in their own lives (Ahlberg, 2015).

By analysing the websites of independent schools directing their schooling to SNSS, the present study intends to contribute knowledge about how these schools define their target group, present goals and visions, and describe their own organisation, content and implementation of activities. Websites are the outward face of schools, where they market their activities through the use of arguments vis-a-vis target group, profile, visions, and competence.

It is relevant to study the content of websites in relation to research on SNSS and education (Dovemark, 2017; Rix, 2011). This is especially interesting if the independent schools targeted at SNSS argue that mainstream schools fail to provide optimum education considering their conditions and needs (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014).

The Emergence of Independent Schools in Sweden

The administrative authority for the Swedish educational domain changed in the early 1990s and today a diversity of private and public actors compete in the school market (Magnússon, Göransson, & Nilholm, 2014). Independent schools make up an increasingly large element within the compulsory school system, not least for the voluntary upper secondary school market (Dovemark, 2017; Dovemark & Holm, 2017; Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011). Among Sweden’s elementary schools, independent schools represent 17% (827/4839) and for the upper secondary schools in the country, the equivalent figure is 33% (428/1313). Of the total number of students in elementary schools, 15% (158 000) attend independent schools and the equivalent proportion in secondary school is 26%, i.e. almost 88 000 students (Association of Independent Schools, 2018).

In a survey of 686 independent schools in Sweden (response rate 79.8%, n=546) (Göransson, Magnússon, & Nilholm, 2012) 55 schools defined themselves as specifically directed to SNSS. For the group in question, SNSS made up 90–100% of the student base. Later, a survey by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014) showed that 61 elementary schools and 7 upper secondary schools *limited* their admission to SNSS during the school year 2013/2014. Another 20 elementary and 6 upper secondary schools *directed* themselves to SNSS although places could be offered to other groups. The increasing number is in line with the general emergence of independent school units.

Independent schools are mainly established within densely populated areas (Magnússon et al., 2014; West, 2014) and schools directed to SNSS are no exception. Almost half of their students are residents in Stockholm municipality. Further, the majority of the students attend the later years of elementary or upper secondary school. The failure of public schools to respond to the needs of SNSS, combined with the increase of students with neuropsychiatric disabilities¹ are two main causes for the growing number of independent schools according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014).

Official statistics in Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018b) show that teacher ratio varies among administrative authorities and school units. Public schools have a slightly higher teacher ratio (12.1 students/teacher) compared to independent schools (13.3 students/teacher). The proportion of teachers in independent schools with an academic degree varies between 23 and 100% depending on the school, which can be compared to the average proportion in public (66%) and independent (56%) schools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018b).

Making comparisons between countries is impeded by the existing multitude of terms and different systems. For example, Denmark's 'efterskole' [after-school] is for young people who failed in a mainstream school, and in Norway the establishment of (private) independent schools has occurred as a result of legal changes during the last decade (Lovdata, 2016). Finland and Iceland have limited private independent school systems, whereas two thirds of the total student population in the Netherlands are found in private confessional schools (The Structure of the European Education Systems, 2014/15). Independent schools in Australia are steadily increasing through private organisations whose focus is on compensating for low socioeconomic conditions (Zehavi, 2012). The Scottish private school system has old ancestries (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2007) and in England independent schools may get state support for admitting students with different diagnoses, such as dyslexia, and especially gifted children (Rix, 2011).

Independent School Support for Students in Difficulties

In independent 'charter schools' in the US², the extent and quality of support for SNSS varies between schools and states (Bailey Estes, 2009). In spite of federal support for their establishment, schools have failed to present innovative thinking for improved teaching and didactic development.

In a survey of school leaders and their perceptions of how their schools address SNSS, Taylor (2005) considered demographics, descriptions of the school assignments, the admission of students, and strengths and weaknesses in the schools encounter with students' varying needs. The assignments were described by school leaders in terms of spiritual values, academic excellence, catering for individual needs, and diversity. Taylor emphasised the central role of leadership, confirmed also in Gous's, Eloff's and Moen's (2014) qualitative study. School leaders describe strengths such as limited group size, a high teacher ratio, flexible and devoted teachers, and an inclusive philosophy. Obstacles mentioned were the absence of appropriate education among staff, a syllabus that is too rigid, time factors, a lack of suitable localities and equipment, and the costs associated with SNSS schools. Taylor (2005) emphasised the need for systematic studies of teaching practice in independent schools in the US, focusing on school leaders' knowledge about special educational efforts as well as how the mapping of such support is performed, and the quality of that mapping.

Using discourse analysis in a study of 78 websites from independent 'specialist schools' in England, Rix (2011) raised the question how the principle of the Salamanca declaration (UNESCO, 1994) on inclusive education receiving all students in mainstream is possible to apply in segregated school settings. West (2014) described a lack of comparative studies related to policy issues in independent schools. Comparing Sweden and England she raised questions about whether the privatisation of schools contributes to less segregation and increased social unity, suggesting that it would be a mistake to presume that there is one single and simple explanation for this. Similarly, Alexandersson (2011) expressed worries concerning segregation of students due to reforms for establishing independent schools. Discussing the increase in independent upper secondary schools in Sweden, Dovemark (2017) in her study of 64 independent upper secondary schools, put forward that schools have become more

segregated. She noted that inequality has increased in spite of the requirement for curricula to further knowledge development and democratisation. Competition means that differentiation and brands are vital for independent schools to survive. Dovemark concluded that focusing on diversity means positioning of students as different to suit the profile of the school in a discourse of marketization rather than a discourse of democracy and citizenship. Values inscribed in the Swedish curriculum to promote cooperation and justice were seldom evident in Dovemark's empirical data.

Malmqvist (2018) described municipalities that hand over the responsibility for certain students to independent schools presenting themselves as specialised in, for example, neuropsychiatric disabilities. This can be compared with the segregated contexts found in public schools. Malmqvist studied ADHD classes and concluded that these contexts were often strongly informed by neuropsychiatric and behavioural theories. Diagnoses, medication, therapeutic methods of treatment, and reward systems had a great scope. The consequences of handling school situations in segregated contexts led to the question: "In what way will ADHD students have schooling that is based on their needs and that is beneficial for their future?" (p.18).

Inclusive Education

Thomas (2013) claimed that inclusive learning environments are made up by school practices that characterise the whole student population and its heterogeneity, focusing the question on how separation relates to learning, fellowship, identity, and belonging. This, in turn is associated with organisational prerequisites such as group size and the physical context of the school.

Discourse on inclusive education often results in parents/guardians believing that their child will no longer be secured the special teaching needed (Malmqvist, 2018; Rix, 2011). Inclusion is thus associated with SNSS instead of a teaching and learning approach encompassing all students (Ifous, 2015). An unambiguous definition of the concept is missing (Malmqvist, 2016; Nilholm & Göransson, 2013; Persson & Persson, 2016), but to discuss its meaning, the concept can be contrasted with its opposite, i.e. with exclusion. Further, it is not merely about who is doing the including or excluding, but also about the one who is experiencing oneself as being included or excluded (Malmqvist, 2016). In-depth studies from a student perspective are therefore needed.

Magnússon, Göransson and Lindqvist (2019) argued that interpretation of the phenomenon of inclusive education should be placed at a general educational policy level where the measure defining an inclusive school is dependent on political discourses and allocation of resources on both national and local levels. Creating a common vision and ethos that acknowledges, respects, and supports diversity of all people and values their perspective, calls for a discussion on normative issues (Alexiadou, 2013). This depends on how school staff translate concepts inherent in the school's value base into action (Ahlberg, Andreasson, Assarson, & Ohlsson, 2011; Andreasson, Ohlsson, & Assarson, 2015) as much as there is a need for a broad, public discussion engaging diverse groups in society (Alexiadou, 2013). Rix (2011) emphasised the need for a theoretical analysis of which type of school has the capacity to create an inclusive environment and he suggested new concepts and discourses to enable next steps towards education for all.

Words associated with inclusion were given a prominent place in the majority of the websites in Rix's study. However, they took their point of departure from a deficit perspective on the students' innate abilities. The researcher concluded that those offering segregated education can identify themselves as specialists with individually adjusted education, and legitimately emphasise values such as inclusion and a mainstream agenda. These discourses need not mean

that the school's practice has changed in any fundamental way. In their striving for inclusion, many educators made substantial changes while others reinterpreted the inclusion concept to fit their already established activity (Rix, 2011).

The specific arenas offered for learning and participation, and how the identity of students is created, are dependent on the institutional practices they are part of and how these practices handle the challenges that come with individual differences and diversity (Säljö, 2012). Transformations of identity shaping thus depend on the learning context in which students find themselves and the kind of interaction made possible (Hjörne, van der Aalsvort & de Abreu, 2012; Van der Aalsvort & Hjörne, 2012). When students are positioned as different subjects, differentiation and dissimilarity become a prerequisite and a criterion for quality to attract students in a competitive school market (Dovemark, 2017). However, this diversity is interpreted to mean that different students fit in different schools specialised for that kind of subject position. This could, according to some school leaders interviewed in Dovemark's study, lead to a strong homogenisation of student groups in schools and negative consequences for fostering democratic values.

Conditions and Prerequisites for Learning and Development

Schooling directed to students in need of support is characterised by complexity. To describe and interpret the independent schools' websites and presentations of how they create conditions and prerequisites for students' learning and development we found it necessary to combine some theoretical concepts and perspectives.

The underlying causes of a student's school difficulties may be explained in different ways. Thus, the actions taken are dependent on which perspective is dominant. Researching discourses of inclusion and exclusion, Skidmore (2004) described a discourse of deviance and a discourse of inclusion. Accordingly, Nilholm (2012) used the concepts of categorical and relational, and a dilemma perspective to describe SNSS and the special educational context. Von Wright (2000) chose 'punctual' and 'relational' to describe the view on students in need of support and the school's approach to and way of encountering these students. The 'Communicative Relational Perspective' (CoRP) is an example of a relational perspective (Ahlberg, 2015; Möllås, 2009; Nordevall, 2011). Research taking CoRP as a starting point studies relations between e.g., different levels, the societal-, school-, group- and individual level. The levels interact and need to be mapped and analysed in order to optimise the prerequisites for learning and teaching in relation to both students and staff. The way schooling is governed and organised; and, how education is planned and carried through creates different conditions and possibilities for students' learning and development.

Relations exist in, and through, the practices that students and staff commonly share (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010), in this case independent schools. Both national (Aspelin, 2012; Hugo, 2011; Möllås, 2009) and international studies (Biesta, 2010b; Raczynski & Horne, 2015) have emphasised the importance of well-functioning interactions between the actors in the school. The *social environment* (The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, 2012; Tufvesson, 2007), i.e. *shaping of relations, communication and cooperation*, thus plays a crucial role in student *learning and participation* (Ahlberg, 2015; Aspelin, 2012). Cooperation may be looked at as an interplay between different organisations and their governing systems, perspectives, and organisation (Danermark, 2004). Treatment, care, and concern characterised the schools in the present research to different extents. This means that values and traditions from such professions influenced the activities along with the legal documents, the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453) and the Health Care Act (SFS 1982:763).

Tufvesson (2007) put forward the 'accessibility model', which states that environmental factors influence students in different ways when it comes to their ability to concentrate in a school

context. The external properties of the school building and physical qualities such as passages between rooms, acoustics, furnishings, seating, group size and the size of the classroom affect students' concentration in a positive as well as a negative way. From this follows a necessity for knowledge about the *physical* surroundings to make them accessible to all students and ensure that any adjustments needed can be undertaken. The second part of the accessibility model is as mentioned the *social* environment and the third the *pedagogical context*. Didactic strategies such as organisation, content, and implementation of teaching create, together with the social and physical surroundings, the conditions and prerequisites for optimal learning (The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, 2012; Tufvesson, 2007).

Alongside concepts such as inclusive education, CoRP and the accessibility model, three main functions described by Biesta (2010a) as characteristics for teaching have been used as theoretical tools in the present study to analyse the independent schools' websites. *Qualification* refers to a school's knowledge assignments while *socialisation* is about integrating a person into an existing social, cultural, and political context by transferring norms and values. The third function, *subjectification* concerns the process of individualisation, i.e. becoming an independent and responsible subject.

Problem of Research

The Swedish school legislation states that all students have the right to equal education irrespective of the school they attend, where they live in the country or their different socio-economic conditions. The Education Act (SFS (2010:800) is to be complied with by public schools as well as the private ones. All students have the right to get guidance and encouragement and if needed, extra adaptations and special support must be offered to the students within the ordinary teaching group. Only in exceptional circumstances can separate teaching groups be authorised. Despite this, several segregated solutions are found in Swedish schools (Malmqvist, 2018). Independent schools are of specific interest, due to their permission to conduct schooling *directed* at or *limited* to SNSS (SFS, 2010: 800, chapter 10, 35§, chapter 15, 33§). These schools seem to be an alternative when public schools fail to create prerequisites and conditions for all students' learning and development. Considering the infrequency of research focusing independent schools directed at SNSS it is important to generate knowledge within this field.

The aim of the research was thus to explore how 55 independent elementary schools present their schooling on their respective websites. The schools have themselves stated and defined their activities as directed towards SNSS but most of them are also open to other students.

Research questions were:

- 1 How is the target group defined and described?
- 2 How are the educational activities of the school described concerning organisation, content and implementation?
- 3 How are goals and visions formulated?

Research Methodology

General Background

A qualitative approach characterized the design of the research based on a content analysis of 50 independent schools' websites. The Internet was expected to be a valuable source, since schools' home pages might be an effective way to market the visions and activities of the schools. All printed pages resulted in extensive document analyses. This form of qualitative research, often combined with other qualitative methods, is distinctive in so far as the web sites exist before the researchers select them for further scrutiny and interpretation.

Sample

The sample for the present research was derived from a previous national survey of 686 independent schools in Sweden (response rate 79.8%, n=546) (Göransson et al., 2012). Responses indicated 55 independent schools targeted at SNSS. This group constituted the sample of the present research. Following an introductory examination of responses from the schools in question, a search for their websites was performed. Thus, the empirical data of the study consisted of the schools' presentations of their activities on websites, in total 1850 printed pages, which were analysed in consecutive steps (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) described further in the data analysis section.

Missing Data

The search for websites showed that one school had shut down since responding to the questionnaire and for another the limited company had gone bankrupt. For three schools no information could be found on the Internet and contacting the schools by telephone gave no result either. The mapping and analysis of printed pages thus included 50 schools. A follow up of the schools' websites in 2018 showed that another seven schools had closed after the present analysis was performed, a point that is further described in the results section.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed in several steps (Figure 1) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011). Initially the schools were sorted according to municipal area (SALAR, 2015, 2017). Further data were processed and compiled then according to school form, ages of target group, number of student places, teaching, treatment, owner of the school, and year of establishment. Starting with the descriptions of the character of their settings, the schools were divided into seven groups (Figure 2). Hereafter data were analysed according to each research question.

Descriptions of the target groups were divided into 13 categories, e.g. students needing change of school, those with neuropsychiatric disabilities, difficulties with relationships, and children of parents with addiction problems. The categories were then interpreted according to the concepts of the ICF-CY: body, activity, and physical and social context factors (WHO, 2007), resulting in four groups (Figure 1). Each school's description of their target group could then be coded using these groups as follows: A, B, C, D, AB, BD and ABD (Figure 1).

Starting from the second research question the websites were read repeatedly by the researchers and processed explanatorily while notes were made as mind maps and reflective memos (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011). Following the sorting of text content, three researchers independently categorised the material in several analytic steps finally resulting in five themes (Figure 1). Texts on the websites about the schools' goals and visions were scrutinised in a similar way.

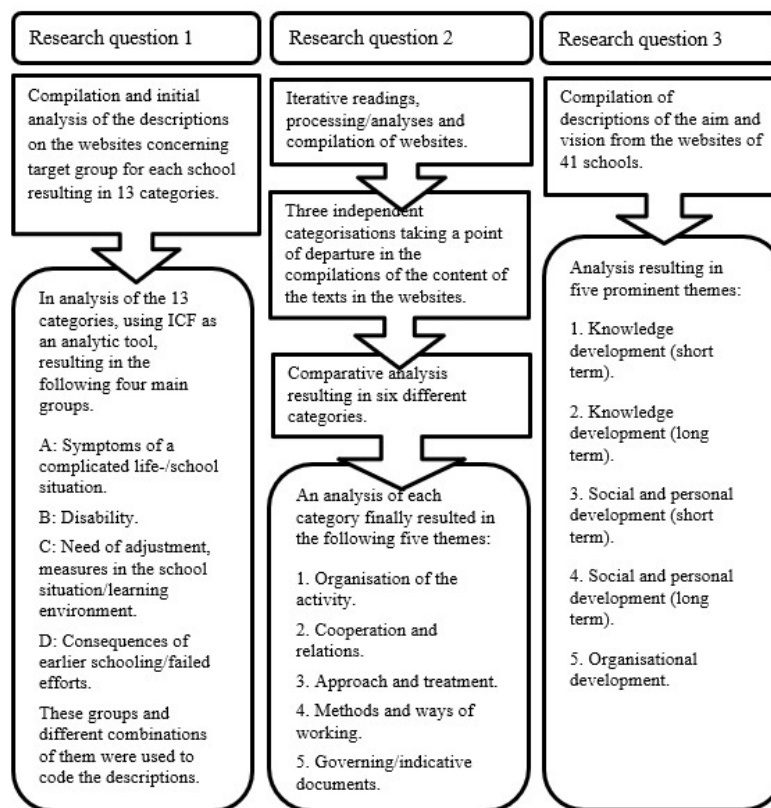


Figure 1. Data analyses.

Reliability and Ethical Aspects

Intersubjective analyses of data were used to strengthen the reliability of the study. Extensive parts of the data were independently analysed by each researcher. Thereafter the units of analysis were compared and further developed. Similarly, the text production was characterised by common discussions and scrutinising. Access to the analysis of the survey questionnaires was helpful in making comparisons and reconciliations with the intention to strengthen reliability.

It should be noted that the current research of websites does not claim to describe how daily work is organised and implemented in independent schools targeting SNSS or how well the information on the websites corresponds to everyday practice. A follow up of the websites was performed in 2018 to look for possible changes in the schools' presentations. Where websites were updated there is reason to assume that there might be differences in presentations depending on how and by whom the updating was done. Websites are one way to market schools and accordingly it is of interest to study their content.

Since schools in the present study often integrated treatment of different kinds, it was sometimes difficult to discern clear information about the schooling in the independent compulsory schools. The content as a whole has nevertheless contributed to viewing the schools from a wider perspective. Principles of research ethics were consistently followed in the study (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, 2017). The data was publicly available, intended to inform the public and especially interested parties. Irrespective of this, use of school names has been avoided in the article.

Research Results

Target Group for the Schools

According to the classification of Swedish municipalities produced by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR, 2017) most of the independent schools in the study (74%) belonged to municipalities identified as large or medium-sized cities and municipalities or commuting municipalities near them. The rest of the schools (26%) were located within municipalities with a low commuting rate near medium-sized towns, smaller towns/urban areas or in rural municipalities.

Six of the 50 studied schools required a diagnosis to admit students, i.e. neuropsychiatric disabilities and/or dyslexia, while two schools clearly expressed that no diagnosis was needed. In a third of the web texts, the concept ‘diagnosis’ was absent when describing the students in the school. Instead words such as ‘difficulties’ or ‘problems’ appeared. Four schools exclusively received boys and two only took girls. A few settings distinctly expressed that they did not admit students who have addiction problems or a criminal record. About a quarter of the schools were open to students with intellectual disabilities.

Symptoms of a complicated school or life situation were often the reason for choosing an independent school directed towards SNSS³. In almost half of the settings (48%) there were different combinations of groups A-D (Figure 1), indicating a multifaceted picture of problems. A complicated school situation together with a disability (A+B) was most often described as a reason for choosing the independent setting (ca. 78% of the schools). Seven of fifty schools referred to earlier failure in mainstream schools where, for example, student health and social services had been involved (group D). Six schools described their target group by referring to the need for input and actions such as specially adjusted teaching aids and ways of working, especially skills training or adjusted physical surroundings (group C).

Independent schools restricting admission often addressed students with neuropsychiatric disabilities, thereby making the specific disability the starting point. Consequences of the disability (physical and social environment factors) were presumably a cause of the student’s problems in school- and life situations, which in turn led to schooling in an independent school setting.

School Organisation, Content and Implementation

Organisation of Settings

Descriptions of the nature of the school settings varied. Categorisation was made from the emphasis on schooling and care/treatment respectively. Of the 50 schools, 12 (24%) exclusively offered schooling, in some cases combined with leisure time activity or short-term residential housing. The remaining 38 schools (76%) were linked to some kind of treatment program. Figure 2 shows the variation in time for students in the setting, ranging from solely school hours to full time living. School settings, linked to institutions with residential care homes with treatment according to the Social Act, are found within groups 5 and 6, which together make up approximately half of the schools.

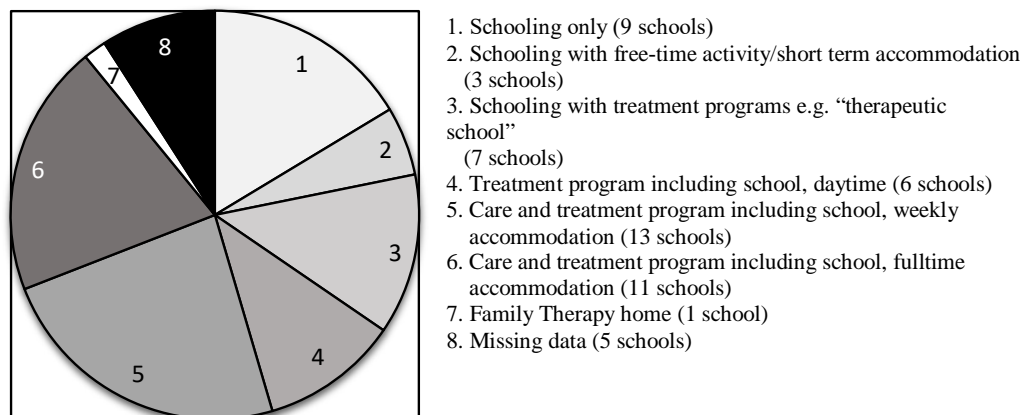


Figure 2. Characteristics of the independent schools in terms of organisation of schooling, care and treatment.

Access to Staff and Competencies

There was a wide range of professional categories in the independent schools in the study. Depending on their focus, a clear dividing line was seen between the settings. In about half of the schools aimed at regular schooling (groups 1–2, Figure 2), the principal was often engaged as a teacher. Besides class- and subject teachers, three schools stated that they had employed special educators and/or special needs teachers, and in one case a ‘dyslexia pedagogue’. Whether the staff members were university trained cannot be inferred from the texts and certain descriptions such as ‘study pedagogue’ were not defined. A few schools emphasised that staff had “long time experience of children in need of special support”. Access to educational tutorials or specific education was described in a few cases.

In the schools included within groups 3–4 and 5–7, teachers made up a minor share of the employees. Except for headmasters, the leadership was extended with, for example, heads of activity, treatment and the boarding school. For groups 3–4, therapists and family processors were important units. Approximately half of the schools in these groups mentioned access to teachers. Except for leisure time leaders/coaches for young people, and student and teacher assistants, there were a range of undefined roles such as healing pedagogues and coordinators. Medical staff (e.g. psychiatrists) were frequently found in consulting roles at these schools.

In groups 5–7, a quarter of the schools did not describe their staff at all. Special needs teachers were mentioned in a few cases, but special educators⁴⁵ were employed on a part- or full-time basis in a quarter of these schools. A couple of schools had access to special educational competence ‘when necessary’. There was no information about other teachers. In cases where treatment staff was defined, these included social workers and cognitive behavioural therapists. Instructors and consultants featured in a range of areas, e.g. child and youth psychiatry, neuropsychiatry, cognitive behaviour therapy, conversation therapy, dance and body therapy, addiction therapy, musical counselling, and ART (Aggression Replacement Training).

All schools emphasised the specific competence and qualities of the staff as well as access to ‘one-to-one teaching’, extra teacher resources and student assistants.

Student Number and Ages

The limited number of students, small groups, and individual support were emphasised as major advantages by the schools. A third of the schools did not mention the number of students that their setting was planned for. There were 22 schools (42%) able to accept a maximum number of 20 students. Eight schools (16%) could accept slightly more, i.e. 21–30 students, while a few, e.g. a school specifically targeted at students with dyslexia, had room for more than 100 students. The range of ages (pre-school to year 9) differed and four schools received only pre-school class to year 6. The rest of the independent schools covered pre-school class to year 9.

Creating Relations and Cooperation

A continuous interplay between adults and students in lessons, breaks, and leisure time contributed to social accessibility, as reflected in the websites. Further, a trustful cooperation with guardians/parents was considered a necessary precondition for students' positive development. In settings with treatment programs, parents most often took part as a resource in processes for sustainable change, expressed in some cases as 'hook-arms-with-parents methodology'. Developmental dialogues, tailored action plans, and evaluations were important tools strengthening cooperation. Cooperation with other actors (municipal and state) was not mentioned on the websites.

The websites presented concepts related to a holistic view of students as they were offered education and treatment. Each person's abilities and needs were taken as a starting point. A common basic view of students and values among the staff warranted a positive view of students, which in turn promoted schoolwork. The schools considered that acknowledgment of students' interests and motivation were important ingredients. Ensuring that interactions are engaging was essential for students to experience trust and participate fully in activities.

Ways of Working and Specific Methods

The main point in descriptions of teaching practice, i.e. the educational access, was the organisation of activities inside and outside classrooms. Small groups, high staff ratio, individual instruction and a variety of working methods were repeated arguments for a satisfactory education. Fixed daily routines, timely well-adjusted working sessions, individually adjusted schedules, structure, and predictability were put forward as essential in the majority of schools. Physical accessibility was exemplified by stable workplaces, one's own desk with storage space and workbaskets.

Access to rooms and different contexts where students can be active was a recurring trait in the presentations. Elements of bodily movement and aesthetics were present in the regular daily schedule. Many schools arranged special outdoor activities, overnight excursions, cultural activities (e.g. study visits, theatre and music events) and other events that aimed to strengthen social relations and exposed students to meaningful leisure activities.

Schools with treatment programs mentioned a rich variety of methods, aiming to change behaviour and give students tools to handle relations, feelings, conflicts, and norms. Pedagogical elements, such as communicative exercises and learning in interaction with others, were also described. The importance of practical ingredients interwoven with theoretical approaches was emphasised along with obtaining knowledge about everyday activities such as mealtimes. There was seldom any account of specific educational methods, strategies or didactic aspects, except in general terms, e.g. 'tailored pedagogy, thoughtful pedagogical principles, and clarifying instruction' or 'teaching Swedish is more laboratory [concrete] than in other schools'.

Governing and Guiding Documents

There were guidelines governing schools that ran settings with treatment activities, in addition to the application of regulatory documents applied in mainstream schools. The curriculum for compulsory school (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018a) was the regulatory framework most often mentioned, followed by different individual action plans as well as other documents governing treatment activities such as the Social (SFS 2001:453) and Health Care Acts (SFS 1982:763), and activity and equality plans. The UN Convention on Rights for persons with disabilities (United Nations - Disability, 2006) and the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) were more rarely considered. The Education Act (SFS 2010:800) was not referred to a great extent as a foundation for the settings.

Formulating Goals and Visions

Of 50 independent schools, 41 have formulated goals and visions using varying concepts, e.g. main goal, operating principle, aim and main objective. The same school could have several different wordings. Goal descriptions were usually related to the actions suggested or already implemented to reach a certain goal. One school spoke to the students themselves: “The goal for the school is that you, after 9 years are ready to succeed with your studies in upper secondary school, academically as well as socially.”

In the presentations of goals and visions, different themes emerged: *knowledge* (themes 1 and 2) on the one hand, and *social and personal development* (themes 3 and 4) on the other, in both cases from a student perspective. These themes were characterised by both short and long term perspectives. Moreover, an *activity* perspective appeared (theme 5) with emphasis on what the school ought to achieve or how the activity should develop. The same school sometimes expressed several themes in its goal description, exemplified in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptions of goals and visions.

Thematization of descriptions of goals and content. Number of schools where these are present in one or more statements	Examples of statements from the school websites
Knowledge development (short term) 14 schools/19 statements	The students should achieve the best study results as possible; passing at least in all subjects and entering into a national program in upper secondary school.
Knowledge development (long term) 12 schools/15 statements	To be able to apply to higher education; desire for further learning; having mastered effective tools for further learning.
Social and personal development (short term) 27 schools/51 statements	Being active and able to manage as much as possible on one's own; every student should be strengthened in her/his own security and trust in oneself; strengthen and increase students' feeling of meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility.
Social and personal development (long term) 20 schools/29 statements	Ability to form a meaningful life; promote development to become a responsible person and citizen; to have a home and live an independent life or be able to manage employment.
Organisational development 20 schools/40 statements	Allocate schools with a common denominator; activities with individually adjusted teaching; closeness, cooperation, and integration with regular/mainstream settings; schools with the child in the centre.

The social and personal development theme dominated both short- and long-term perspectives (80 statements in themes 3–4). This was considered relevant given that the majority of schools ran a therapeutic activity with care and therapy as central elements. In comparison, the knowledge theme stood out in less than half of the descriptions (34 statements in themes 1–2). The expressed visions were usually found in the activity theme while more concrete formulated goal statements emanated from a student perspective.

Theme 5 contained content from the websites from an organisational perspective. It considered the profile of the school as well as perspectives representing foundational values such as equity, participation and equal rights. Focus was on safety and trust in oneself as a student as well as the school's respect for staff, students and parents/guardians. The descriptions of aims and visions also directed attention to a proactive mission, i.e. preparing students for a return to their municipal school. The meaning of the texts on the websites mainly focused on the individual student, staff member, and parent/guardian. How school difficulties relate to group-, school- and society level was seldom described.

A Follow up Research of Websites from Independent Schools

A follow up of the websites in summer 2018 showed that seven of the schools had shut down since the Swedish Schools Inspectorate called in their authorisation. One of the schools missing a website in the first analysis now had a presentation of its activity on the web. The analysis also showed that two independent schools had changed their names. Another tendency was for the change of owner or fusion into a bigger corporate group. According to the Association of Independent Schools (2018), one single actor could have 187 school settings but the most common is one unit, which is true for 587 actors. The number of independent schools directed at SNSS is not clear.

Discussion

The aim of the present research was to explore how 55 independent schools present their activities on their respective websites. The results showed that the students' complicated school- and life situations were often combined with disabilities mainly in the neuropsychiatric field. Schools restricting their acceptance mostly directed themselves to students presenting problems within the neuropsychiatric field and the majority of these schools ran both schooling and treatment programs.

A continuous interplay between staff and students during school hours, and trustful cooperation was considered a prerequisite for students' positive development and for physical, social, and pedagogic accessibility. The small student groups, individual instruction, high staff ratio, staff competence and varied ways of working were emphasised as specific characteristics of the schools. It was less common for learning content and didactic aspects to be mentioned on the websites.

When analysing presentations of goals and visions different themes emerged, with social and personal development dominating, followed by knowledge and operational development. One conclusion is that the texts concentrated on the individual level without any obvious focus on how school difficulties relate to group-, school- and society level.

Segregating Solutions

Inclusion and exclusion processes will always occur to different degrees in different school contexts (Malmqvist, 2016). They happen in both public and independent schools (Malmqvist, 2018). However, an increase in segregating solutions for students whose needs cannot be met

in the mainstream does not harmonise with the intentions of the Education Act (SFS 2010: 800, kap.3) although such groups are not forbidden in law. Some of the independent schools point out their successes and opportunities in supporting the development of students by referring to the failure of students in mainstream/public schools. From that point of view, the emergence of independent schools directing themselves to SNSS (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018b; Stockholms stad, 2014) could be regarded as a consequence of the inability of municipal schools to meet students' varied needs (cf. Rix, 2011). Malmqvist's study (2018) provides examples of municipal schools handing over the responsibility for certain students by sending them to an independent school, specialised in, for example, neuropsychiatric disabilities.

The results showed that schools restricting their admission often addressed students with neuropsychiatric problems. They described their students largely as students with a disability. The organisation of activities could be compared to a permanent segregated group, something that is against the goals for inclusion and limits students' possibilities for a diverse togetherness and participation (cf. Ahlberg, 2015; Möllås, 2009; Nordevall, 2011). Thus, it is not primarily a relational view where contextual factors on different levels are mapped and acted on. Instead, disability is the focus, i.e. a discourse of deviance with great impact (Skidmore, 2004). From a punctual perspective, focus is on *what* and not *who* the student is (von Wright, 2000).

The majority of the schools (76%) are linked to some kind of treatment activity and its regulations. The neuropsychiatric paradigm largely distinguished these schools, giving them an expert role aside from the mainstream track. Specific competencies in the medical and psychological field were highlighted in the presentations such as 'access to psychotherapist' or 'specialist in psychiatry' (cf. Malmqvist, 2018; Rix, 2011). Methods described by the schools were characterised by care and treatment inputs, which aimed to change student behaviour. The visions and goals primarily focused on socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2009), i.e. social and personal development. Qualification as learning and knowledge development got a lesser role mirrored in the schools' staffing.

Regardless of the organiser, concerns have grown regarding the consequences segregated school contexts may bring (Alexandersson, 2011; Bailey Estes, 2009; Dovemark, 2017; Dovemark & Holm, 2017; Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011; Göransson, Malmqvist, & Nilholm, 2012). There is a risk that schools conserve a categorical or punctual view (Nilholm, 2012; von Wright, 2000). The student becomes an object of therapeutic inputs in order to return to mainstream schooling (Rix, 2011). However, this return was not an explicit goal dominating the descriptions on websites for the schools in the study. There are occasional examples from earlier studies (Göransson, Magnússon, & Nilholm, 2012). The extent to which students return to mainstream schools cannot be answered at this stage but requires further studies.

Follow Up and Evaluation

Malmqvist (2018) points to the need for pedagogical follow-up studies examining the consequences for schooling influenced by neuropsychiatric and psychological research from a long-term perspective. Correspondingly, we find it necessary to follow and evaluate the impact on students admitted to independent schools directing or restricting their activities to SNSS. West (2014) also requests more studies exploring and problematizing the contribution to social coherence by independent schools.

Research is required to study the students' genuine participation and their opportunities to perceive themselves as committed and learning subjects (Ahlberg, 2015). What consequences arise for a student's identity development and future if schooling is first and foremost characterised by difficulties, e.g. having dyslexia, concentration difficulties, Asperger's syndrome or ADHD (Dovemark, 2017; Dovemark & Holm, 2017; von Wright, 2000)? It is ultimately about how the basic values of the curriculum and a democratic idea of variety is interpreted and realised

in everyday education, something that applies to all schooling (Dovemark, 2017; Andreasson, Ohlsson, & Assarson, 2015).

A further question is whether the school choice underpinning the emergence of independent schools (Prop., 1991/92:95), increases the actual possibilities of all students and parents/guardians. Could it be that independent schools are the only remaining alternative when mainstream municipal schools are not working for a student (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014)?

Regardless of principal organiser, all students have a right to develop and be successful in their learning (Bailey Estes, 2009). However, goal achievement in independent schools restricting admission of students does not show results in that direction (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). In spite of the schools' qualities and special investments, limited goal achievement remains, reducing possibilities for future studies. There is probably a range of underlying causes for this lack of achievement, but it suggests that the schools may in fact not be specialists (Rix, 2011; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). Professionals possess competence within their respective areas and carry with them conceptions of what is possible and what is not (Anderson & Östlund, 2017). Against this background, the low ratio of teachers and special educators in many schools must be considered when discussing goal achievement.

Creating Relations and Organising Teaching

In the presentations from the independent schools, the importance of well-functioning social relations was emphasised and cherished in several activities. There are good models for mainstream schools to follow in terms of what is done to create good relations, togetherness and successful working interactions (cf. Ahlberg, 2015; Aspelin, 2012; Biesta, 2010b; Hugo, 2011; Raczynski & Horne, 2015). Cooperation with parents/guardians, a common basis of values, taking care of students' interests and motivation, and a positive approach are all emphasised as strengths by schools in the present study. The question is whether this can be viewed as something unique for independent schools directed at SNSS. Rather, it should be a common sign of all schooling regardless of principal organiser. Some parts are governed by Swedish law and are thus a requirement to be fulfilled by all schools. Academic and social needs should be attended to (cf. Bailey Estes, 2009). The emphasis on creating relationships in the studied schools raises questions about whether the Swedish educational focus on knowledge requirements, grades and merits has led to social aims being neglected in mainstream schools, which in turn has led to consequences for students' learning.

The importance of relations is in line with the foundational idea of CoRP where communication, participation, and learning are viewed as a triad (Ahlberg, 2015). The school presentations did not highlight the importance of learning content and didactics for learning itself as a social phenomenon (Säljö, 2012). This signals that knowledge development is placed in the background in most of the schools in the present study. The strategies described mainly dealt with how teaching should be organised (small groups, high staff ratio etc.) and concrete measures often advocated by neuropsychiatric research, e.g. set daily routines, individual schedules, and predictability. The rich variety of treatment methods confirms the influence of neuropsychiatry and psychology (cf. Malmqvist, 2018).

Limitations and Further Research

The present study has clear limitations. The website text was formulated by the schools themselves. We cannot determine whether the content is a true reflection of the reality of the schools. That would require further studies conducting interviews with the school leaders

and other staff as well as observations of the teaching occurring in classrooms. This study also cannot determine whether student participation is higher in the schools studied than in others. As the schools market themselves to SNSS, they can gain from listening to the voices of students and their experience of physical, social and pedagogical/educational accessibility. The perspectives of parents/guardians also need to be studied to gain a holistic picture. There was scant information available on the websites about whether an independent school serves as a permanent solution for earlier complicated schooling or if active efforts are made for the return of students to their regular school. This should be of keen interest in further research.

Conclusions

An underlying neuropsychiatric and psychological paradigm seems to exist emphasising the expert role of the independent schools, often described as an alternative when the mainstream schools have failed to meet students' different needs. About three quarters of the studied schools were linked to therapeutic activities and they presented a rich variety of methods, aiming to change behaviour. In contrast, specific educational methods, strategies or didactic aspects were seldom described. In line with this, the social and personal development of the students dominated the goals.

The present research contributes knowledge about independent schools directing themselves to SNSS and what they announce they can offer to this group of students. Nevertheless, the findings call for further research in order to close the research gap. It is necessary to follow and evaluate the impact on students admitted to independent schools directing or restricting their activities to SNSS. Regardless of principal organiser, the consequences of segregated solutions and the individual centred focus must be scrutinised and discussed. The responsibility of both independent and municipal schools for SNSS, and for equity and increased inclusion is therefore a high priority.

Notes

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Endnotes

1 ADHD, autism spectrum disorders and Tourette syndrome are some of the most common neuropsychiatric disabilities. People with neuropsychiatric disabilities have different cognition, i.e. the person perceives information and experiences, and processes sensory impressions in a different way. People surrounding the individual must therefore understand and adjust to the needs of those with neuropsychiatric disabilities so that those affected can function in their everyday life and education. Adjustments made are dependent on the individual. For students with a different cognition to develop and learn in the best way a thorough pedagogical mapping is needed. From this mapping, it should be clear what adjustments and special support the individual student needs (National Association Attention, Attention, www.attention.se).

2 Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities, Center for Law and Education under contract to the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA), USA

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4 ⁱⁱⁱ Expressed in IF-terminology (WHO, 2007), a description of activity-level.

5 ^{iv} There are two different occupational groups working with special educational support in Sweden: special teachers and special educators [special pedagogues].

^v KBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), ART (Aggression Replacement Therapy), SET (Social and Emotional Training), KIT (Cognitive Affective Training), TBA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), T4C (Thinking for a Change) and ADAD (Adolescent Drug Abuse Diagnosis). Educational elements that are used to different degrees include FMT (Functional Music Therapy), TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped CHildren) and methods for communication training such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System).

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