

Swedish School Development and Inclusive Learning Environments: A Single Case Study

Malin Öhman

Motala municipality, Sweden

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Abstract: The aim of the study was to explore teachers' and school support team's experiences and description of their own, and their own school's process towards developing more inclusive learning environments. The results of the study reveal that the school has undergone significant development. Teachers report that there has been a change of language usage and value. They also describe how they have moved from ideology to change of practice in the classroom. At the same time, the picture that emerges is that of an uneven spreading effect between different teacher teams, and even more so between the school support team and the rest of the school. The school support team expressed an ambition to work with health promotion and prevention programs. However, the long-term tradition in which the work often is characterized by an individual focus based on the shortcomings of particular students seems hard to change.

Keywords: inclusion, school development, school support teams

Preceding the more thorough presentation of the case study is an introduction providing a brief description of Swedish school development towards more inclusive learning environments. This introduction will also describe the regulatory body of the Swedish school system and School support teams (the counselling system).

Since the Second World War, education acts and other regulatory documents have established that the Swedish school system is for everybody. Within this process there has also been a change of language. In the 1960s, voices were raised claiming that children with different types of learning difficulties should not be educated in separate settings. This initiated a process of integrating more pupils into regular educational settings. However, this was done without much change in the learning environment by simply providing a physical setting, not an available education for these pupils. The lack of adjustments diluted the concept of integration and caused a language shift from using the

concept of *integration* to introducing the *inclusion* instead. Inclusion focused on changing the learning environment instead of changing the pupil in order for her or him to fit in. During the *Ifous R&D program*, described below, the participants adopted the notion of *inclusive learning environment* instead of inclusion in order to focus even more on the environment to provide educational settings that fit all pupils. In the last years, The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools has presented a working model for schools to explore to what extent all students have access to the education providing the most recent concept *accessible education*. Schools can explore to what extent they provide a social, pedagogical and physical environment that is accessible for all their pupils. However, the long tradition of schools' sorting task is a heavy heritage that presents views that are hard to change. Nevertheless, many teachers and schools have undertaken the challenge. They are working in a systematic way to change the view that the pupil is the problem, and that pupils with troublesome learning should be taught somewhere else. They organize the education in different ways to create good inclusive learning environments for all (Öhman & Schad, in press).

In 2010, the Swedish government passed a new *Education Act*, which came into effect as of 2011. The *Education Act – For knowledge, choice and security* – entails major reforms encompassing all levels from preschool to adult education, reflecting the current division of responsibilities between central and local government (*Den nya skollagen* – Ds 2009:25; *Swedish Code of Statutes* – SFS 2010:800; *Se, tolka och agera* – SOU 2010:95). The legislation has undergone a comprehensive review aimed at drawing up a new and modern law that reflects the conditions in the school sector as well as the management by objectives approach in school governance. The *Education Act* (SFS 2010:800) states that access to equivalent education for all is the basic principle guiding Swedish education from childcare to young adulthood. Therefore, pupils in need of special support are not to be treated in a differential manner. A student at risk of not achieving the minimum proficiency requirements or experiencing other difficulties in their school situation, may, however, be in need of special support. The underlying premise is that students in need of special support should get the support they need in the regular class setting. Special education support is, therefore, to be integrated as much as possible into the framework of regular education (SFS 2010:800).

1 The counselling system – school support teams

The *Education Act* (SFS 2010:800) states that all students should have access to school support teams consisting of a school psychologist, special education support, a school social worker, a school nurse, and a school doctor. However, the *Education Act* does not define what “access to” means, i.e. how many schools or pupils a school nurse or a school psychologist should serve. Neither does the act indicate how to organize the School support teams.

Some municipalities and schools have a central organization and some have all the professions employed at the school level, under the head teacher. In some organizations some of the professions, usually the school nurse and the school social worker are employed by the head teacher and the rest at a more central level. Other differences regard the physical placement where some have their offices at a school and some in a central setting. This lack of guidelines makes the statutory “access to” most unequal between different schools and municipalities over the country.

As stated in the *Education Act* (SFS 2010:800) the Student Health Services have a central role in creating good learning environments. The main task for the team is to work with health promotion and prevention to support pupil’s development towards the educational goals. The Student Health Services have a particular responsibility for helping to remove barriers to learning and development and to support all pupils in achieving their educational goals. The Student Health Services are also involved in, for example, the development and implementation of equal and fair treatment programs, education regarding tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, and other lifestyle-related issues. The Student Health Services also have a specific responsibility for guaranteeing that schools maintain good and safe conditions for students throughout the school day. In order to achieve this, a high degree of collaboration between the student health personnel, the teaching staff and the head teacher in a particular school is necessary (Öhman & Schad, in press).

The psychologist’s role in the student health services-team should be to assist the school with psychological expertise and psychological interventions. A school psychologist is therefore considered to be an important specialist supporting students to achieve set educational, developmental, and health goals. The school psychologist is a licensed psychologist with a five-year college education followed by a traineeship year (PTP, practical education

for psychologists). The training is a comprehensive education that provides a good basis for practising as a school psychologist. School psychology in Sweden is in the midst of a paradigm shift. The shift means a changed focus from individual assessment to focusing on supporting teachers to provide learning environments that promote health. The change is due to the altered circumstances within the educational system, the country's major educational reforms with a strong focus on health promotion and prevention. The establishment of the Student Health Services is thought to directly affect school psychological services (Schad, 2014; Öhman & Schad, in press).

In recent years, the correlation between school results and future mental and physical health in the population has been shown to be of great importance. For the population at large, the single most important preventive measure is to ensure accessible education for all pupils, enabling all pupils to reach the proficiency requirements (Gustafsson et al., 2010). Sweden is in several aspects a country that has come far in this regard, but still faces quite a few challenges.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate together with *The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools* and the *National Agency for Education* (2011) has recently presented a study in which they investigated 15 schools. The study concludes that in four of the 15 schools, pupils get adequate adjustments in education in order to help them reach the minimum requirements. 10 out of 15 schools do not take enough thorough assessments in order to pinpoint the right adjustments. The schools that meet the requirements of adjustments and special support cooperate with the school support teams. The competence in the team is used at an early stage in order to help create inclusive learning environments and to support the pupils to meet the requirements of the education system (Skolans arbete med extra anpassningar, 2016; The Swedish Agency of Education, 2003). In the report from The Swedish Agency of Education (2003), it also emerged that second-generation immigrants constitute the largest proportion of pupils in need of more support than they receive (Öhman & Schad, in press).

2 Case study: Inclusive learning environments

2.1 Background

Ifous (Innovation, Research and Development in Schools and Pre-schools) is a Swedish independent, non-profit research institute. In 2012, *Ifous* initiated a large-scale, longitudinal R&D program on inclusive learning environments in schools. The program involved 12 municipalities and 31 schools in Sweden.¹ Several researchers followed the program. This single case study (Öhman, 2016) is a part of the larger research and development endeavour. The purpose of the R&D program was to promote the development of inclusive learning environments, increase knowledge at both the school and the management level as well as contribute to the strengthening of the collective knowledge of inclusive learning environments. One goal was to track the participating municipalities' progress towards more inclusive learning environments and changing practice to meet all students' needs. The research examined development at all levels (students' experience of participation, teachers changing practice in the classroom, as well as the development of the different management and project groups: administrative managers, coordinators, directors and school team). The areas of research have focused on charting the field of development of inclusive learning environments as well as generating theory and spreading knowledge (Tetler et al., 2015). Overall, the results from this three-year research program show that in many schools there has been a positive development resulting in more inclusive learning environments (Tetler et al., 2015). The main conclusion is that there is no model to follow. In order to succeed, each school must undergo the process, explore the concept and the meaning of inclusive learning environments for that particular school. Each school's development must be based on the school's position and its conditions and that is where the work must proceed from.

Success factors for the schools to create more inclusive learning environments appear to be the long-term nature of the program and anchorage throughout the municipality, from administrative management and down to the individual teachers in the classrooms. Even the common cognitive frame of reference and values which emerged are emphasized as important parts (Tetler et al., 2015). According to Tetler et al. (2015), the administrative

¹ www.ifous.se

management raises the importance of teachers' will and commitment, that development cannot take place with a top-down framework, but is built from the bottom up and with the help of and inspiration from other schools and departments. Andersson et al. (2015) provide several examples showing that there has been school development. Even from the start, several teachers had an ideological conviction to reduce exclusion. With the Ifous program, teachers were able to go from ideology to practice and found ways to answer the "how-question". The language has changed as teachers increasingly problematize the learning environment instead of the students. An important factor in order to differentiate teaching methods more has been the collegiate learning. Teachers should not stand alone with difficulties, but gain support from colleagues and have forums to discuss difficult issues. As teachers developed a different understanding of their mission and changed their view on what is disturbing (the student or the environment), they describe that the students have received an increased tolerance to inequality and that job satisfaction amongst teachers has increased. The reports can be found on the Ifous' website.²

2.2 Aim of the case study and research questions

The purpose of this single case study, as a part of the larger Ifous' research endeavor, was to illuminate one school's progress towards more inclusive learning environments. The research questions were: (1) How do teachers describe their own and their school's development process to promote inclusive learning environments? (2) How do the members of the student health service team describe their development process to promote inclusive learning environments? (3) How are the conditions and constraints of the work towards more inclusive learning environments described? (4) What support structures are presented as important to promote inclusive learning environments?

2.3 Method and implementation

The case study was carried out at a larger school with pupils between the ages of 6 and 16 (with an after-school centre and approximately 680 pupils) and two head teachers. The school and the municipality participated in the Ifous national program on Inclusive learning environments. The data collection was

² <http://www.ifous.se/app/uploads/2013/02/201509-Ifous-2015-2-slutversion2förwebb.pdf>

made through semi-structured interview in focus groups, during the spring and autumn of 2014. The data collection includes three recorded focus group interviews. Two interviews with teachers and one with the school support team (SST). The selection of participants to the first interview was made by the two head teachers and consisted of first teachers and special education teachers representing all stages of the school. The school support team was represented by the head teachers, a special education teacher, a school nurse, a school psychologist, and a resource person. For all of the interviews, a query wizard was used. The three interviews were listened through a few times and then transcribed and analysed at the content level. The interviews yielded a total of 85 pages of printed text. The materials were categorized and thematised on the basis of the statements made in the text. Categorization has also provided space for interaction between data and theory.

At the start of the project, more schools were supposed to be included in the study. However, due to different external conditions only one school participated. The selection of the teachers for the interviews was made by the head teachers. These two factors limit the generalizability of the study. The process described is unique to the specific school and other schools who are working towards more inclusive learning environments have different prerequisites. This means that the described success factors and conditions of work are not immediately applicable to other schools. Those who wish to make a similar journey have to take into account the context in which they operate. The teachers who were interviewed are people who, even without this R&D project, take an active part in developing their teaching, to improve themselves and are interested in present research. The teachers' stories and description of developmental processes may therefore not be generalizable to all teachers. At the same time, the aim was to capture and describe the development process. From this perspective, it can be an advantage to investigate people who actively work with their own development. Furthermore, when taking considering the other schools in the R&D programme, they all show and describe similar processes as in this case study. This fact increases the possibility to generalize the results of the case study to other schools.

3 Findings

The results of this study reveal that there was a complex interaction between different factors affecting the school's efforts to develop more inclusive learning environments. It is possible, however, to separate certain aspects which appear to be more critical. It is partly the head teachers' leadership and partly the teachers' own drive, including peer learning in a variety of forms.

3.1 School development, leadership and values

The results show that the main factor in leadership is the long-term nature of health-promoting and preventive work of the school. This work was initiated by one of the head teachers when she took office seven years ago and was further stimulated by the Ifous program. The head teachers have clearly pointed out the road ahead, kept to it and limited other questions that the school was to work with. This leadership is described by the following quotes:

Yes, that the head teachers put out the course and make sure that we keep it. They do not give up, they are persistent and they remind us again and again. It is very important. Without that we lose focus, I think.

Yes, but I believe that on one hand, our head teacher was very clear when she came here, she was very clear when she started this. She is a head teacher who visits the classrooms very often. Our views of the students and how we respond to the students, how we relate to them were things that mattered to her. We are here to help the student. No discussion. And then we can't have the view that a student should only be out of my classroom, is annoying or weak and ought to end up in a fixed group somewhere.

In the interviews, it appears that value work led to increased tolerance between teachers and students and between students themselves, a difference the teachers expressed by the quote below:

I'm thinking that it's about the culture and how we as a school succeed to raise students to have a high tolerance with each other, and I think, again, we are good at this, that the students here are used to the differences and accept that they all are different. We have the learning studio where you go to get extra support when you need to, and no one thinks of that as different, it is a good example.

Parallel with the process in which teachers change their teaching methods runs the school's value work. This has contributed to the school staff appreciating each other's differences as assets and creating a more open

and permissive climate amongst colleagues. It is now possible both to ask for help and to share best practices. The teachers appreciate the change and worded it as follows:

To have the courage to ask for help is also one of the most important things, as a teacher.

Lack of prestige.

Yes, and I mean, we've had to work with that, it hasn't always been easy, but we have gotten better.

Furthermore, the head teachers limited the issues that the teachers were expected to work with and develop. Value work and an explicit emphasis on what to focus has been clearly stated goals from the management's side. Those are basic conditions which enabled the development of teachers and the school to become a learning organization.

3.2 Internal processes

In the light of the context described above, it is possible to identify additional factors. These are categorized under three themes, considered to have contributed to concrete changes in the way teachers teach and work with the pupils.

- Input via:
 - school team (as part of the R&D program);
 - external lecturer at study days;
 - seminars on educational research.
- Collegial learning:
 - colleague visit;
 - joint workshops on pedagogical and didactic issues.
- External demand for change:
 - school inspection visit that demonstrated the need for increased student influence;

- management decisions on two-teacher system and a reduced number of small, fixed groups.

All of the above have pulled together as teachers changed their understanding of the learning task and changed their practice. There have been several kinds of counselling. The head teachers have worked hard to influence the teachers' values and organized the school to facilitate colleague learning. The school team has influenced, educated and tutored the rest of the personnel. The teachers meet in pairs and teams to discuss didactic questions, counsel and inspire each other.

Notably, research underlines the importance that teachers themselves identify the need to develop their practice to bring a change (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1996). Change may thus start from one's own experiences and problem-solving. Other research shows that teachers acquire new values through altered practice. When the teachers start acting differently, even without perceived need to do so, they develop different thoughts and attitudes (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Weick, 1976). The present study demonstrates how the teachers' changed practice and values come from an interaction between these two explanatory models. Forced changes in practice lead to new values and understanding. Didactic discussions also change the perception of the teaching task, creating a need for change in practice. The teachers provide several examples of how the entire staff underwent a change in student perception in the last few years and how they become increasingly better at the relational factors and treating all pupils with respect. Everyone is welcome and of equal value. The teachers talk more frequently with students on issues like student influence, both educational and emotional. As emphasized in clinical research, a trustful relationship with an adult at school can be crucial to a child's future (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). An important aspect of the interview material is that teachers highlight and exemplify that respect for the individual is irrespective of school success and school behaviour.

In line with previous research, the teachers also describe that the students express greater self-efficacy in relation to the knowledge requirements and thus link together health and learning (Kungliga vetenskapsakademin, 2010; Socialstyrelsen, 2010; Galanti et al., 2016).

3.3 Challenges and dilemmas

While the school has undergone a clear developmental process, the study also shows some dilemmas that the organization is struggling with. The three main concerns are:

- spreading the effect from the school team to the entire school;
- the school support team's work and involvement in the inclusive program;
- external restrictive framework factors.

The spreading effect

The conditions for continuity in school development on inclusion have turned out differently in different teacher work teams, depending on whether the team had the representation from the school team or not. Those who did not have school teams members, or only random representation rarely discussed inclusive learning environment at team meetings. The continuous access to counselling was important for development. When someone kept focusing the questions on diversifying the learning environment and how to adapt to all pupils' needs it kept the process going. The study identifies development of the school as a whole and, as one of the respondents puts it, that "everybody is on board". At the same time, the interview material reveals a need for the school to work further with the equality in the progress. The school is divided into three different age stages. In the daily practice, they work quite independently of each other. Differences in the dispersal effect can be explained by the fact that schools can be described as loosely coupled systems. This means that changes in one part do not necessarily affect other parts of the organization (Weick, 1976).

School support team assignment and school development

The phenomenon with different levels of the dispersal effect becomes evident in the school support team as well as in the rest of the school. It is shown both in the inclusive program and in the understanding of the student support mission as a whole. The school support team members who are also part of the school team have a different reference frame around the inclusive learning environment concept and its educational and democratic values than those who are not a part of the school team. At the school in general, there has been much work to reach a consensus regarding what inclusive

education means for this particular school. Equivalent progress does not appear to have taken place in the school support team, nor has the question been addressed of how the school support team's work fits in with the rest of the school's inclusive work. The school support team does not seem to have participated in the inclusive program as a team, although some individuals have been very much involved. This is expressed by the following quote:

From my perspective, I don't think there has been any change. I work almost to 100% of preventive health care. If you've got almost 700 students, it's hard to find time for anything else. I would like to engage in different health promoting projects. But all I've got is a 40 hour work week, and I have to do my regulated work tasks.

In the same way, there does not seem to be a consensus on the school support team's task as a whole. The various team members expressed different interpretations of their specific mission and the general school support task. Some members express more of a medical discourse with an individual focus while others advocate more of general health promotion and preventive work.

Over all, the team seems to continue working as before. Both teachers and the staff in the school support team give the impression that the team is usually engaged in rectification work at an individual level.

Several of the school support team members express an ambition to work more with health promotion. However, they also express a weak confidence that it is possible. The link between the work in the classrooms and the school support team seems to be relatively loose. The student health work that the teachers engage in appears to come from the school's common values rather than out of an explicit common concern for student health that permeates the organization. These results are in line with research available about school support teams. It is proven to be a difficult challenge to schools and school support teams to shift the focus from the individual pupil to the learning environment and to see diversity as an asset rather than a burden; going from rectifying effort to health promotion and preventive work (Reuterswård & Hylander, 2016). In order to make progress in their team work, the school support team could work with questions about consensus on the mission, both the school support team's mission and the school support team in relation to the rest of the school's inclusive work. Just as it appears that the teaching staff received a modified understanding of their

mission and thereby changed their working methods, equivalent work could be done in the school support team.

Limiting external framework

The third dilemma expressed in the interviews is the external organizational framework, represented by both state and local government. In conversations about what has been difficult and challenging, both teachers and members of the school support team relate many of the factors outside their own school. It is partly about the state control of curricula and goal-related grades. It is partly about the municipal governance, with a large number of special educational groups for children in various types of difficulties and how specific funds for SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) are distributed. These troublesome facts are stated in the next citation:

I think it is like this: we cannot dismiss the fact that we have to do what we might not think that we would have to do, all these assessments. We have a troublesome SEND system. In order to get help, we must show that there are problems and seek funding for the school to sort things out. So sometimes we have to do things that may not be preventive. We've fallen behind in that matter.

A more self-critical way to discuss dilemmas is on the basis of Argyris' (2006) theory about learning organizations. He discusses the difficulty for talented employees to focus on themselves and their actual behaviour. They are used to "doing things right" and "being successful". It makes it easy to blame difficulties on circumstances which cannot be influenced. A possible development for the school would then be, based on the prevailing circumstances, to discuss what they can do in order to continue their work and the school's process in the desired direction. What do the collaborators say they do and what do they actually do? A different perspective in order to understand results and processes is the *frame factor theory* (Carlgren & Kallos, 1997). This is a theory intended to be helpful when understanding how a school's development process and subsequent performance can be explained by external frame restrictions and free space. In order to enable to achieve specifically desired results, certain given conditions are required. However, specific conditions alone do not ensure a specific result, because in the free space within the frames several different processes can take place. The municipality in the research, as a part of the school's context, has no overarching goal of developing more inclusive learning environments.

The inclusive program is, at present, primarily a project on a number of individual schools. In this light, the municipal special educational groups provide a framework which obstructs schools from fully working inclusively. The allocation of funds for the SEND is centralized and there is no local policy paper advocating inclusion which European Agency (2003) highlights as a significant criterion for work with inclusive learning environments. At the same time, it is not only the actual framework that regulates what can be done, but also how the frames and free space are interpreted and understood. Respondents identify obstacles in their work and a continued development could be to work with how they can relate to the external framework in a different way. They could engage in further discussions on to which extent they are eligible to work in the desired direction in spite of some restrictive frames. And how to use free space and take even greater responsibility for the students results under the given conditions.

4 Concluding remarks

The complexity of the processes identified in the study can be visualized in the following figure. It shows the interaction between the fixed external frames, stable leadership (the horizontal arrows) and direction and dynamic processes (gearwheels) within the school. The school operates in a larger context including state and municipal governance, with a number of frames that both limits and provides some free space in which the school can operate and develop. School management and its long-term strategy on health promotion and prevention with values for both staff and students appear to be stable conditions that have lasted over time. Management has also specifically changed the organization of groups of children in need of special education. Within the external framework, with the head teachers' management and the Ifous program, a number of dynamic processes which influenced each other were enabled. Counselling from the head teachers, the school team and colleague learning have been of great importance in the process. The school team contributed with knowledge about inclusion from different perspectives, both from Ifous' seminars and based on requests from the colleague. Teachers and students are working on common values. These factors help to give the teachers a different understanding of their mission, the educational and didactic questions as well as the joint student support task. The changed understanding creates a need for change in practice. The school support team (circle) is available within the school and collaborates with the

teachers mainly around individual students. But considered as a team, it has not been involved in the inclusive program. The study showed differences in the pace of development between the different groups at the school, both between the various teacher work teams and teams that work with student support. In spite of these differences and challenges previously described, it is the overall image that the school as a whole has moved towards more inclusive learning environments. Development and change can be seen in the way that teachers describe changes in values and student views and more flexible ways of working.

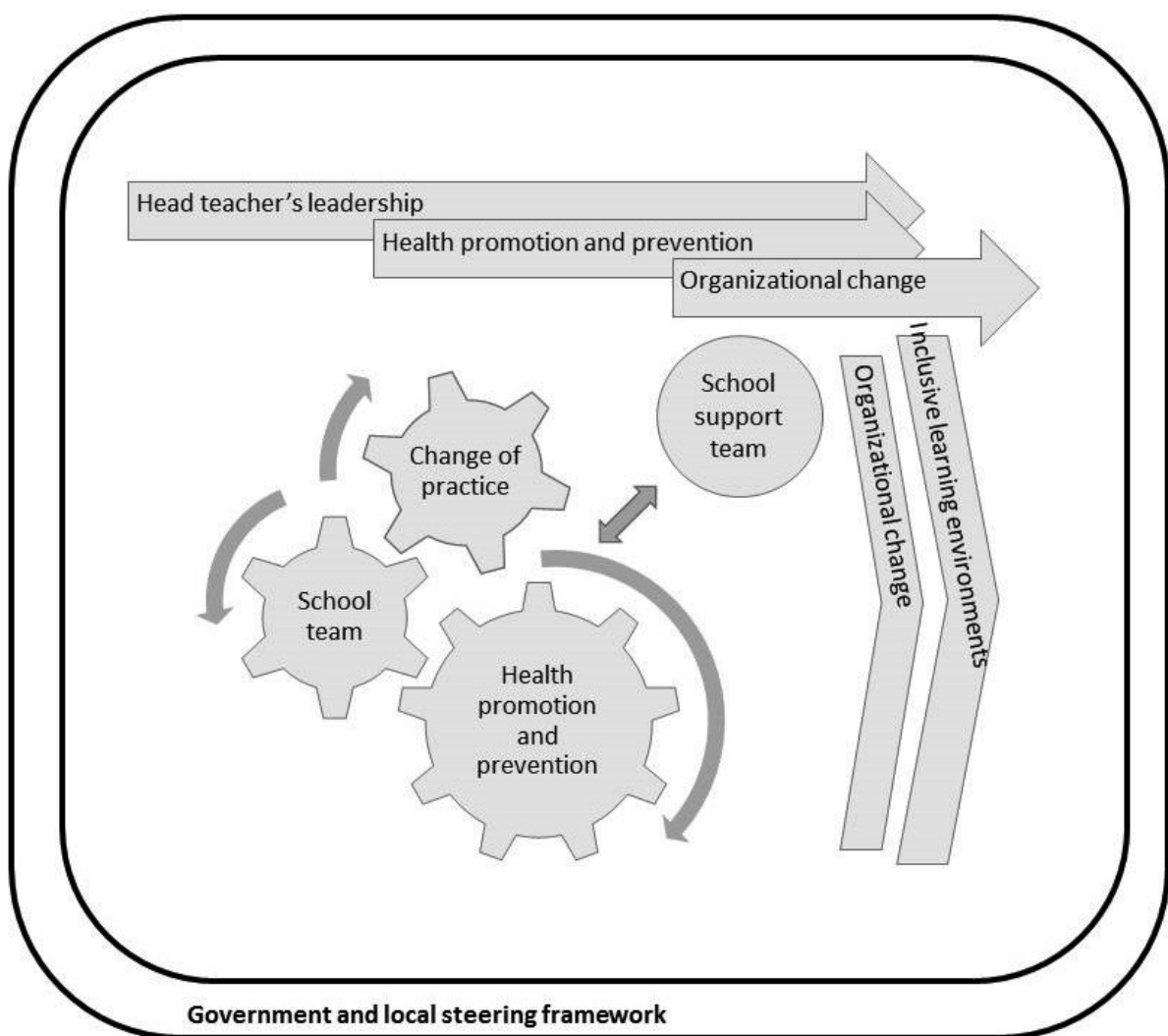


Figure 1. The school leadership and development processes that took place within the external framework (Öhman, 2016; Öhman & Schad, in press).

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Author

Malin Öhman, Motala municipality, Drottninggatan 2, 591 35 Motala, Sweden,
e-mail: malin.ohman@motala.se

Rozvoj škol ve Švédsku a inkluzivní učební prostředí: případová studie

Abstrakt: Cílem této studie je prozkoumat, jakou mají školní podpůrné týmy (mohou se skládat ze školního psychologa, speciálního pedagoga, sociálního pracovníka, školní sestry a školního doktora) zkušenost a jak popisují proces rozvoje vlastní školy směrem k inkluzivnějšímu učebnímu prostředí. Výsledky naznačují, že školy prošly značným vývojem. Učitelé uvádí, že se změnil používaný jazyk i hodnoty. Popisují, jak se posouvají od ideologie k reálné změně praxe ve školních třídách. Ze stejných dat ale vyplývá, že tento efekt není stejný u všech učitelských skupin. Ještě větší odlišnosti se ukazují mezi školním podpůrným týmem a zbytkem školy. Právě školní podpůrný tým vyjádřil ambici pracovat na preventivních programech a programech podpory zdraví. Nicméně dlouholetá tradice, ve které se tento tým většinou soustředí na jednotlivce a jejich problémy, se těžko překonává.

Klíčová slova: inkluze, rozvoj školy, školní podpůrné týmy