

Access for all at School

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Abstract. In 2012 a project was conducted aiming to explore accessibility in preschools and schools in one region of Sweden. The project was a cooperation between the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools and Mälardalen University. Both questionnaires and interviews were conducted. Questions and answers concerned accessibility to the physical, pedagogical and social environments. The results show that physical environments in schools and preschools usually are not ready to welcome new pupils with disabilities. When a pupil with disabilities comes, the school will first have to adapt the physical environment to individual needs before education can start. The pedagogical environment and the teaching can be divided into three categories: traditional teaching, teachers who have started to change their teaching and progressive teachers who have come a long way towards accessibility. A tolerant and accepting social environment varies between schools that provide joint activities for pupils with and without disabilities and those that do not.

Keywords. Access, school, preschool, joint activity, physical environment, pedagogical environment, social environment.

Introduction

During 2012 a project was conducted aiming to explore accessibility in preschools and schools in one region of Sweden (Skogman, 2012). The project was a cooperation between the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM) and Mälardalen University. 185 questionnaires were distributed to teachers and other school staff in 40 municipalities. The questions and answers concerned accessibility to the physical, pedagogical and social environments (Ds 2010:20) in preschools and schools in the region. Interviews with teachers in some of the schools were also conducted. Both questionnaires and interviews explored different aspects of accessibility in the three environments. Accessibility is closely related to the concept of Universal Design and both are a prerequisite for inclusion for all.

1. The physical environment

The accessibility of the physical environment was assessed in three categories; mobility access, usability of spaces/rooms and the opportunity to orient oneself in the schools and preschools. In the questionnaire accessibility points were given and the results show that for both preschools and schools the orientation aspect was estimated least accessible. Most classrooms were judged cramped for space, but some schools had the opposite situation when they described their physical environment as a totally open

space. The pupils were expected to listen to the teachers and do their school work in the company of 60 or more other pupils. One teacher said:

“This can be experienced as a total lack of structure....[]and it is difficult to find your way around the school...”

Even though the mobility access and usability was assessed as relatively good, Swedish schools usually do not have the readiness to welcome new pupils with disabilities. When a pupil with disabilities comes to the school, the school will first have to adapt the physical environment to individual needs before education can start.

2. The pedagogical environment

The questionnaire contained questions about multimodality in everyday teaching, accessible communication and use of pictures in instructions, varied lesson planning, accessible information in school material and books and technical aids. The interviews with the teachers focused on getting more in depth answers to the same topics as the questionnaire. The findings from both questionnaires and interviews show that teaching, when it comes to accessibility, can be divided into three categories.

1. *Traditional teaching* – two quotes from the interviews:

“Many pupils can benefit from structured teaching”

“I give instructions and we have a dialog and then the pupils engage in individual work”

2. Some teachers have started to change their teaching, and one of them says:

“I believe in varied lesson planning and I think that we all need to use all our senses and I notice that some pupils are very good at remembering what I have said and others are very good at looking at pictures”

3. A few teachers have come a long way towards accessibility – The first teacher talks about pupils with learning difficulties who are included in an ordinary secondary classroom where the teachers (two teachers) always present the material for the day at different levels so pupils can choose which level of difficulty that suites them best. She says:

“In this class the pupils with learning difficulties do not label themselves as persons with learning disabilities even though their school work follow special school curricula. In an ordinary class there are more opportunities for these pupils – in the special school there are barriers....”

The second teacher talks about a way to organize the teaching in themes. The pupils will study for example Swedish language for a whole week and that gives them a lot of time with the same teacher and a more calm and accessible pedagogical environment. The teacher talks about a boy with difficulties to concentrate and says:

“When he came to us he hadn’t attended school for a long time and now he is getting good grades and will be in high school next autumn....[]he hasn’t even had an assistant..”

3. The social environment

The assessment of the social environment started with the question whether the preschools and schools offered joint activities for pupils with and without disabilities. In both questionnaires and interviews questions were also asked about cooperation between pupils, the school atmosphere, intolerance and discrimination. The most interesting findings can be summarized in the table below.

Table 1. Social environment findings

	Joint activities	No joint activities
Pupils without disabilities do not want to cooperate with pupils with disabilities	41%	56 %
The atmosphere in the school is prejudiced and intolerant	6 %	26 %
Discrimination from school staff	12 %	29 %

The preschools and schools that give opportunities for pupils to participate in joint activities also provide a more accessible social environment. There the atmosphere is tolerant and accepting and there are few incidents of discrimination compared with preschools and schools that do not provide joint activities for all their pupils. The table also shows that in the teachers’ perception, pupils without disabilities do not want to cooperate with their peers with disabilities. This is often the case regardless of whether joint activities are offered or not. This is not in accordance with basic ethical values of Swedish preschools and schools and will have to be addressed.

References

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