Inre kraft och yttre tryck
Perspektiv på specialpedagogisk verksamhet i glesbygdsskolor

Gerd Pettersson

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt förvar i Hörsal G, Humanisthuset,
fredagen den 17 februari, kl. 10:00.
Avhandlingen kommer att förvaras på svenska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor emerita Siv Fischbein,
Specialpedagogiska institutionen, Stockholms universitet.
The overall aim of this doctoral thesis is to increase knowledge and understanding of special needs education in rural schools. More specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to examine and analyse the enabling and constraining conditions in special needs education for the mission of class teachers’, principals’ and special educators’. To fulfil this purpose, the following research question is posed: What are the enabling and constraining conditions for special needs education and its organisation, and what meanings are given to special needs education in rural schools? In order to meet this aim four studies were conducted in a total of 58, mainly Swedish rural schools. The schools were spread out geographically and represented both public and independent rural schools. The empirical data consists of interviews, observations and questionnaires. The method of analysis was mainly qualitative content analysis. Descriptive statistics were also used. The first study (Article 1) examines class teachers’ conditions for supporting pupils with special educational needs in seven rural schools in Sweden, Norway and Finland. The main results of the interview study are summarized into four themes; relationship, collaboration, distance and concern. The second study (Article II) investigates how principals in rural Swedish schools organize special needs education. A web questionnaire was answered by 45 principals. The results show that the principals balance between an individual approach to special needs and a flexible way of organizing special needs education. The third study (Article III) examines how special educators’ expertise in educational consultation is utilized in order to support professional development of class teachers who work in rural schools with diverse pupil groups. Three authentic consultation sessions were observed and analysed. The results show that consultation as a support strategy enables the class teachers to support pupils with special educational needs and strengthens professional collaboration between special educators and class teachers. The fourth study (Article IV) investigates what meanings educators working as principals in independent rural schools attach to special needs education. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire with open-ended questions. According to the principals’ special needs education is an activity aimed at supporting all pupils’ learning and development. The results also show that the independent schools have strong ties to the surrounding community. The thematic analysis of the four studies displays two main concepts; inner force and outer pressure. These concepts illustrate the enabling as well as the constraining conditions for special needs education in rural schools. The inner force stems from relationships, familiar atmosphere, the possibilities to meet all pupils’ needs, collaboration and flexible ways of organizing the educational activities, while the outer pressure stems from threats of school closure, lack of resources and unappreciative municipal authorities. Despite the constraining conditions, which make the rural school vulnerable, the enabling conditions seem to dominate, making the rural school an inclusive learning environment able to meet all pupils’ diverse learning needs.

Keywords
rural school, special needs education, multi-grade teaching, perspective, inclusion

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