



ORGANISATION OF PROVISION  
TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

# **ORGANISATION OF PROVISION TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

**Meeting the needs of all learners – a school transformation  
Nossebro School, Essunga, Sweden  
26–28 February 2013**

**European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education**



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## PREAMBLE

The Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education project is being undertaken by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) from 2011 to 2014. The project's key question is: how are systems of provision organised to meet the needs of learners identified as having disabilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) in inclusive settings within the compulsory school sector? The themes to be explored include:

- Inclusion as a quality issue – the presence and participation of all learners in the school/classroom community enhances the quality of the educational experience.
- Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to diverse needs (including developing the role of specialist provision as resources to support the mainstream sector).
- Collaboration and networking – effective provision of educational and multi-agency support within the mainstream sector.
- Funding and resourcing – targeting support to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.
- Leading the change process.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

1. **A Literature Review:** this provides the conceptual framework for the project and includes a review of research literature post 2000 on project themes as well as an analysis of past Agency projects.
2. **Country Information:** a questionnaire has been circulated to Agency member countries to gather information on how provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools is organised and evaluated.
3. **Identification of examples of practice:** five sites in Sweden, Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Malta will be visited in February/March 2013. A report will be produced following each visit.
4. **Thematic seminars:** following collection and analysis of data from the visits, a series of seminars will be held in autumn 2013. The seminars will explore in detail the factors that have an influence on the success of inclusive education, taking into account different country contexts. A report will be produced following each seminar.
5. **Project synthesis report:** the report will draw together evidence from all project activities and, following an analysis of key issues, will provide a series of recommendations and potential quality indicators for the organisation of provision and implementation of new practices to improve systems of provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.
6. **Leading the change process:** a practical tool to support policy makers in leading change towards more inclusive policy and practice will also be produced.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Agency gratefully acknowledges the generous help, support and warm welcome provided by the visit hosts, in particular Bosse Svensson, Johanna Lundén and Tina Hededal, and all the staff at Nossebro School. Thanks also go to members of the Essunga Municipality, learners and parents who gave up their time to meet with us in Essunga and to Bengt Persson, University of Borås, and members of the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools.

Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role played by members of the Project Advisory Group, Agency Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators who took part in the visit and provided additional support.



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## INTRODUCTION

This report provides information about the study visit conducted by the Agency team to Essunga, Sweden, in February 2013.

Nossebro School in Essunga was selected, along with other four sites, from practice examples provided by Agency Representative Board members and their networks as part of the Organisation of Provision project questionnaire.

The Agency team, in collaboration with the Project Advisory Group (PAG) members, identified criteria for the selection of the sites that should be followed up to provide relevant information for the project. The criteria were: relevance of the site, clarity of the information provided and evidence of the following: quality assurance; system leadership and the management of change; collaboration and partnership; sustainability and a variety of support systems (different approaches to and ways of organising support). Overall, the examples selected also needed to reflect diversity of geographical location and learner needs.

Nossebro School was selected for its focus on school transformation. The visit theme was: 'Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools – changing practice to improve support for learners with different needs (in particular those with disabilities)'.

The focuses of the other study visits were:

- Flensburg, Germany: how do inclusion networks support the needs of learners with disabilities?
- Vienna, Austria: inclusive education as a quality issue – a collaborative approach to quality management.
- Ljubljana, Slovenia: developing the role of special schools as resources to support mainstream provision.
- Valetta, Malta: organisation and resourcing of in-class support (with a focus on the roles of school and multi-agency staff).

After presenting a short summary of the lessons learnt from the study visit to Essunga, this report describes the different supports provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings and the different factors that contributed to their development. Information about the management of change, transformation strategies and sustainability is also included.



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Re-organising the school to include all learners lead Nossebro School's results to improve dramatically.
- Learner success is seen as the school's responsibility and there is a learning culture and strong collaboration at all levels.
- Research evidence was used to challenge thinking, change attitudes and support changes in practice.
- The school meets the needs of all learners with flexible support, but no special classes.
- Co-operative teaching and an agreed lesson structure have increased learning time and opportunities for support.
- Resources were re-distributed and are used effectively to support all learners in the mainstream school.
- Discussions and debates about the common purpose have developed thinking and lead to a better understanding of the learning process.



## CONTEXT

Essunga is a municipality located 50 miles from Gothenburg. It has about 5,500 citizens, making it one of the 15 smallest municipalities in Sweden. The educational level is low and many young people are supported by the local social work service. Recently, a number of young refugees with no parents have been sent to Essunga to stay with support families.

There are three primary schools and one secondary school serving all learners in the municipality. There is no upper secondary school in Essunga.

In Nossebro School, children attend from pre-school to grade 9. The school is organised into two units: grades 0–5 (160 learners) and grades 6–9 (270 learners). There are approximately 240 learners in kindergarten and around 200 learners attend after-school recreation. About 30 learners are enrolled in the ‘Swedish for immigrants’ course and about 20 refugees come to the municipality each year. There are eight learners in the programme for learners with severe learning disabilities (Särskola).

In Nossebro School, there are a total of 48 pedagogues. This includes two special needs pedagogues (for pre-school and grades 0–5), two special needs pedagogues (for grades 6–9) and seven special needs teachers. There is a head for grades 0–5, the health service and the compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities, a head for grades 6–9, the leisure time centre and health service and a head for the learning centre. There are also 2 full time assistants plus one part time assistant (including those working on the programme for pupils with learning disabilities.) A coach is employed jointly by the education and social services.

The 2007 results, when only 76% of the learners were eligible for upper secondary national programmes, were described as ‘a cold shower’ for the school. Following this, a massive programme of work began.

In the academic year 2006–2007, about 20% of learners in grades 6–9 had been placed in special education groups and other segregated support units. There was a recognition that special groups were taking a lot of resources yet, despite this, learners were not achieving the expected grades. It was also evident that learners sent to the special groups – even if a placement was only intended to be short-term – did not return to regular class, but remained ‘excluded’ with the consequent low expectations and stigmatisation.

In 2007, all learners (in grades 6–9) were sent back to their regular classes. By closing down the segregated special education groups that existed in the school and by redistributing the resources, Nossebro School was able to include all learners. The people who worked with the special education groups followed the learners into the mainstream classrooms. In this way, the special education resource was added to the regular classes.

This change helped all learners to feel included and made it possible for there to be two teachers in the classroom for core subject lessons: Swedish, English and maths.

The realisation that the classroom is the school’s most important arena and that each learner’s success is the responsibility of the school took root. Individual adaptations became an everyday occurrence for all learners. Inclusion strengthened both learners and teachers in terms of knowledge and social development.

To succeed with inclusion, teaching methods were challenged and it became a priority to change the lessons to meet the needs of all the learners. A very clear structure was introduced to the lessons. While this was essential for some learners with special needs, it also proved to be a benefit for everyone in the classroom, by using time more effectively than previously.



Early in the change process, the Education Board decided that all work should emanate from current research evidence. Literature was summarised and given to all staff, from the pre-school teachers to the adult education staff and the content was discussed and connected to the teachers' own knowledge and experiences.

By closely monitoring the progress of every learner and communicating with them about teaching and support, motivation increased. The focus on knowledge and inclusion also meant that the school's values and standards were followed more carefully, without the need for a special focus. The school now has an open culture built on trusting relationships.

Inclusion, a focus on knowledge and adaptation to individuals led to better results for the learners. In 2010, the school reached the Education Board's goal that all learners should pass all subjects. All the learners were also eligible for upper secondary national programmes. In 2011, the national test results for ninth grade in maths, Swedish and English were better than ever. Only two pupils left school without an upper secondary qualification and the proportion of pupils who had passed grades in all subjects was 89%.

The fact that Nossebro has reached its ambitious goals and achieved good learner results year after year proves that this way of working is sustainable. The school has also learnt that inclusion is a must for reaching such goals. However, the school feels that the most important thing is not to pass and be qualified for upper secondary school, but for all learners to feel that the school has supported them and has done everything possible to enable them to succeed.

#### *Key influences of the country context*

During the visit, colleagues working at the national level (in particular from the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools) highlighted the features of the education system in Sweden that might have a particular influence on the developments in Essunga. More information about the national system can be found in the national overview for Sweden at: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/sweden>, but relevant points are summarised here.

Sweden has, for many years, upheld the principle of a 'school for all' with attention to equal standards and equity in education. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly underpins policy and practice to the extent that staff in Essunga took this for granted and did not appear to pay specific attention to it.

There is no legal definition of special educational needs and support is guided by learner need. Every learner has a right to an Individual Development Plan, but if special support is needed to meet the national goals an Action Provision Plan may be developed. This requires a more extensive investigation of need and may involve school staff, the learner welfare/health team and external services, as well as learners and parents.

In Sweden, a distinction is made between special pedagogues, who work with school leaders, teachers, parents and other agencies to co-ordinate support, and special education teachers, who work with learners. A further consideration is that in Sweden a district habilitation service supports the child and parents, while the National Agency for Special Education and Schools supports the school and its professionals. The practice in Essunga of appointing a head for both education and social services in the municipality is still unusual for Sweden.

Under the Education Act 2010, learners with learning disabilities should be included in mainstream schools, but study an alternative curriculum developed for the Särskola or school for learners with severe learning disabilities. There is now a need to justify the use of any segregated provision. Values, tasks, goals and guidelines are the same for the



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Särskola, but the syllabi and knowledge requirements vary as learners focus on aesthetic activities, communication, motor skills and everyday activities.

In grades 3, 6 and 9 national tests are taken in Swedish, maths and English, as well as Swedish as a second language where appropriate. In years 6 and 9 some additional subjects are also tested. National comparison of results began in 2007.

Funding follows learners, with schools being paid a set amount according to the number of learners attending. There is no additional funding for special education and schools are responsible for allocating funds in a way that meets the individual needs of all learners.



## THE PROJECT VISIT

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and consultants visited Nossebro School from 26–28 February 2013 to investigate the theme ‘Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools – changing practice to improve support for learners with different needs (in particular those with disabilities)’. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about the developments in Essunga, to observe lessons and interview different stakeholder groups. This included a local politician, a community leader, two school leaders, two special pedagogues, four teachers, two parents and four learners. Interviews were conducted by members of the project team according to a schedule to provide consistency across the five project visits. All interviews were recorded for later analysis. Inputs were also received from a researcher from the University of Borås and from a member of the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools who had provided some support for the school.

In addition, relevant documents on national and local policy and practice and outcomes from a research project conducted by the University of Borås were collected prior to and during the visit. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.



## INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES

‘With an inclusive approach, much of the values system comes for free’ (Principal, Nossebro School).

### Values and beliefs

When it was decided that the approach to improving results would be to adopt an ‘inclusion strategy’, the current principals explained that, not only did they feel that it would establish the values they wished to embed, but that it would also be a way to enable the school to work for the society we all want, rather than adapting to the present society.

Initially, the Education Board and Head of Education and Social Services set out a vision, providing strong leadership at both community and school levels.

The vision:

- *Every learner should succeed.*

The motto:

- *Learner success is the school’s responsibility.*

The goals:

- *All learners should pass all subjects.*
- *Everyone should be included.*
- *Everyone should succeed in the classroom.*

These goals provided a focus on knowledge, each individual and inclusion, supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, national legislation and research literature.

The emphasis on inclusion and the view of school effectiveness as the ability to respond to the individual needs of all learners lead to ways of providing support for all vulnerable learners in ways that did not stigmatise. Underpinning developments was the belief that the children should be at the heart of everything. As the Principal says, ‘We have used the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in everything we do’.

### Attitudes

For teachers, a change in ‘staffroom attitude’ was required – and a move away from blaming or judging learners, parents or colleagues – in other words a change to what Hart et al. (2004) call the ‘ethic of everybody’.

The school now promotes a culture of learning, where both learners and teachers are motivated by feedback. For learners, this has led to a change from ‘it’s cool to be bad’ to ‘it’s good to be OK’ at school. For teachers, it has meant taking responsibility for all learners and recognising the importance of relationships and trust among all stakeholders.

As a result, teachers no longer focus on the medical needs of learners, but on their own professional resilience to adapt to different learners and different situations. It is also interesting to note that, with the exception of eight learners with more severe disabilities, learners are generally supported by teachers rather than by learning support assistants. In the staffroom teachers talk about how a learner can be helped rather than ‘how bad learners are’. The principals and all school staff focus on strategies for success and recognise a range of achievements which are rewarded.



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To quote one of the teachers, 'The most important influence is maybe the attitude of mind – how do I look upon myself and other people (pupils) and it was not an easy change – it took at least a year'.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration – a crucial process in school transformation – is evident at all levels in Essunga. It begins with close co-operation between the Chair of the Board of Education and the Head of Education and Social Services for the Municipality. Having one head for these two services is considered critical. Collaboration continues with two school principals and a distributed leadership model within the school. There is a team approach to the needs of all learners and co-teaching in many lessons and this, together with close work with parents and families and the involvement of learners in school organisation and in their own learning, strengthens all other processes. The participation of all stakeholders in school development is a key principle.



## TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

The shock of the poor results in 2007 helped the school to accept 'how things were' and they admit that, had the results been 'less bad', this might not have happened. All stakeholders agreed that action was needed to improve the situation – the need for change could not be questioned.

A first step was for teachers to move away from blaming or judging learners, parents or colleagues and accept responsibility for all learners in the school. School leaders wanted to develop the thinking of all stakeholders and felt that an anchor was needed to provide security and support to staff who might be afraid of 'getting it wrong'. Research literature was summarised and studied collaboratively and, in this way, existing beliefs and attitudes were challenged – and changed. Leaders also felt that the research provided reassurance as it was possible to identify some strengths as well as areas for development – it was not all bad! The senior leaders worked together with staff and became the lead learners in the study of research.

Full participation was also considered to be a key principle and the school leaders wanted to ensure that as many people as possible should take part in the change process and be 'on the train'. The Chair of the Board of Education stressed the importance of enabling everyone to 'pull together' and this was reinforced by the current principals who pointed out the importance of everybody doing the same to increase the strength of the 'pendulum swing'.

Strong and clear political leadership from the Municipality was an important factor in the transformation of Nossebro School, but professionals were given space – and time – to do their jobs without interference, in a climate of mutual respect and trusting relationships. School leaders were also given a clear mandate to focus on change and the development of pedagogy by 'lifting' some administrative tasks.

The present Head of Education and Social Services stresses the importance of the relationship and trust between politicians, the Head of Education and Social Services and principals and feels that, without this trust, the developments that have taken place would not have been possible. This climate of mutual respect and co-operative relationships also helped when there was a change of school principal and two appointments could be made internally (ensuring continuity). One of the special pedagogues was appointed as principal as, despite being quite young for the post, she was committed to the change towards more inclusive practice, had the respect of staff and was able to assert authority when necessary.

In order to change teaching and learning in Nossebro, the decision was made to return all learners from segregated special classes back to the mainstream classroom. An increasing number of learners (approximately 20%) were being sent to special education for a wide variety of reasons, leading to a large and very diverse group of learners in this provision. In addition, learners rarely, if ever, returned to the regular classes.

As one special education teacher pointed out:

*Before we always picked out children. If we had 25 learners in the group, one was bad – away to the Oasis... 24 children, one was bad – away to the Oasis... 23 or 22 and so it went on. The Oasis was a big, big group – with learners that were satisfied, but they didn't take any grades. The pace was too slow, no demands.*

The extensive resources that had been allocated to special education were used in a new way that would enable all learners to succeed in the classroom together.



Teachers were given the opportunity to 'get on board' willingly. The initial changes were implemented by volunteer teachers who then served as a model for the rest of the staff. One volunteer crucial to the change was a young special pedagogue who was later appointed as a Principal.

Collaborative teaching began with special teachers and coaches working with class/subject teachers to support all learners. After classes, the teachers discussed and reflected on the lesson (what they had noticed, what could be done differently, which learners needed help, etc.), which made the collegial learning very clear. One teacher recognised that 'having two teachers in the classroom forces you to improve and think about what you are doing'.

Parental involvement has been strengthened since 2007. Parents were also given the opportunity to engage, alongside teachers, with the research that informed the school's changing practice and those interviewed noticed a change in thinking with a greater focus on 'each and every one'. Parents are supportive of the school's work and say that the approach taken was presented to parents as 'diversity and inclusion'.

In Essunga, Per Skoglund from the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools who has worked with the school as an external counsellor, suggests that it is necessary to start with the reality of the situation and the possibility of oneself as a causal factor to see the need for change. He summarises the key factors in the school's move from homogenous regular classes, created by the existence of special groups (with low expectations and low achievement) to the inclusion of all pupils in the regular system (Skoglund, in press). The following are fundamental for learner learning and school innovation: firstly, a move from resource allocation to resource use; secondly, an explicit vision based on research; and thirdly, the building of a community of practice and the ability to learn in all stakeholders.

In summary, the key strategies supporting the move towards inclusive policy and practice and high standards appear to be:

- Shared values 'embedded' in all policy and practice as a basis for school and wider community development that engages all stakeholders. Such values underpin the development of beliefs and attitudes that support the inclusion of all learners.
- A change in culture with mutual trust and strong 'team' relationships.
- A focus on learning across the whole school community – leaders, teachers and learners – is at the centre, with success for every individual seen as the school's responsibility.
- Strong leadership at all levels, combined with effective management to set direction and turn vision into action.



## SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

### Support structures in the community

Nossebro School, in the small municipality of Essunga, has support from the local community at all levels. Many local people have been involved in the changes – from political leaders to parents and learners – and share a belief in the school's inclusive approach. The political leaders, with concern for the quality of the school, have taken part in reflection on the changes, asking questions to encourage new learning, new perspectives and consideration of the routines previously taken for granted.

The local politicians have been concerned not only with the academic results, but also with the well-being of all learners. While they appreciate the role that data played in recognising the problems at Nossebro, they are also aware of the need to balance the requirement for data with other school commitments – in particular time spent with learners. They believe that the focus should be on evaluating the school's effort and supporting leaders, teachers and learners.

Such community support strengthens the inclusive process and the school is proud of the fact that it does not send any learners out of the municipality, but meet the needs of all local children. The school coach organises summer activities for some learners and supports older learners in arranging activities for younger learners during holidays, providing further support in the community.

The district habilitation service provides advice and support to learners with more severe disabilities (including centres for visual and hearing impairments, learning disabilities and autism, as well as learners requiring psychiatric support) and their families. Learners may be referred by health services or by the parents themselves and the multi-disciplinary team may include paediatricians, physiotherapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, social workers and nurses. When necessary, the principal or special pedagogues at Nossebro can make a referral to the habilitation service or other external agencies and this support is then co-ordinated by a school network group (including members of the school welfare team).

The habilitation and support centres funded by the county cover all of the municipalities in each county and focus primarily on support for children and their parents in the home setting. The staff at Nossebro do not regularly call on these services as, for the last ten years or so, these regional centres have not primarily focused on education. The task of school support was taken over by the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools and schools in the Essunga municipality have, over time, received support from the Agency for several children with more severe disabilities. In fact, it was through a very complex learning situation, in 2006, that a connection was made between support for individual pupils and the start of the school development process.

A systematic collaboration between the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools and the habilitation, visual and hearing impairment centres has been built up since 2004. This is set out in a written statement that clarifies the division of tasks, working practices and methods of collaboration. However, despite this, the system is not yet perfect. There can sometimes be a discussion between actors (parents, school, county support and national support) in concrete individual cases, concerning what is the best for the child, as different actors may have a different focus.

The schools in Essunga feel that, at times, the county habilitation has high expectations, for example concerning the technical solutions expressed in their recommendations for schools. This is understandable since the financing of technical support is divided – on the



one hand, the county funds technical support for the daily living needs of individuals, while the school has responsibility for all learners' educational support needs. Although this may seem dysfunctional, it has the advantage of raising questions about the support system as a whole in order to develop it further. No single actor has the total 'judgement' and it therefore serves as a 'dialectic' within the system.

Overall, the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools acts as a partner to the school and offers support, for example, concerning teaching strategies and attitudes, competence development or the pedagogical consequences of disabilities. It also offers in-service training through courses, distance education programmes, conferences and seminars. In addition, the Agency offers support through four national Resource Centres dealing with learners with visual impairment with or without other disabilities, severe speech and language disorders, hearing impairment combined with severe learning disabilities and/or autism and congenital/early deaf-blindness. The Agency operates through five regional units with around 200 counsellors.

### **Support structures in the school**

*The aim in this school is to allow either a recognised skilled teacher or a special education teacher with specific knowledge in the subject that the students need support in to teach the students in one-to-one teaching. The combination of participating in regular education classes and receiving one-to-one instruction may be viewed as one of the success factors in the work with pupils with special needs (Persson, 2012, p. 14).*

Additional support for learners in school may involve teachers, learning support assistants, special education teachers and pedagogues, counsellors and nurses, as well as psychologists, social workers and other services from outside school. A coach is also employed by education and social services to work across the year – including school holidays. The coach is available for all learners, in particular those with any social difficulties. A key part of the role is to provide a link between school and home and also social services where they are involved. The coach is also available to help with homework and revision for tests and to support activities in the leisure time centre after school hours. The coach acts as an important role model for learners and is an important resource for teachers.

These personnel form a responsive network around individual learners who may need additional support and work closely with the school principals, as well as parents and the learners themselves.

As soon as a problem is identified, the teacher and/or special pedagogue meet with parents and learners. Where necessary, the school healthcare team (nurses, counsellor) and special education teachers are also involved. Before calling on external forms of support, the school will attempt to solve any problems by trying a range of approaches/strategies and reviewing progress. Support is, therefore, flexible, individualised and timely and the special education teachers also work flexibly with colleagues and re-allocate their support as necessary.

For all learners who may be receiving support, the school team meets weekly to discuss progress. The special education teachers evaluate short-term goals (and review longer-term goals) at regular intervals. As all learners have an individual plan, these are seen as the most effective way to provide support without necessarily moving on to the next step – an Action Plan. At Nossebro, attention is clearly focused on the support process rather than on the creation of written plans.



There are no longer any separate classes (formerly in a different building), although there may be some withdrawal of learners to separate rooms at certain times as part of specific support programmes (for example, learners with autism may follow a focus/rest pattern that requires a quiet environment, while learners with more severe learning disabilities may have one-to-one teaching sessions).

To quote the Principal, Nossebro has 'individual inclusion – different solutions for different children'. For example, learners with more complex needs may be supported in class by an additional pedagogue, they may work shorter hours in the classroom and then receive support from a social worker for practical activities or may receive some one-to-one support for particular subjects. Additional support is also arranged as required to meet personal needs.

The school timetable further facilitates the provision of support for all learners by reducing the numbers in class at certain times. Practical subjects may be timetabled at the same time as core subjects (for example, half a class does physical education while the other half does Swedish). Although in such cases, there is only one teacher in the group, the small numbers allow teachers to focus on the needs of each learner.

The culture in the school is such that getting support for learning is no longer seen as 'different' – support is available to all learners. Many learners use the homework club and attend holiday school (approximately 40 learners attended last year) for a variety of reasons and the co-operative teaching also means that all learners can get some extra help when necessary without fear of stigmatisation.

During the Agency visit, teachers and leaders emphasised how the school has adopted a positive approach, always seeing difficulties as challenges that lead to improvement. To create a more positive climate for learning, teachers have begun to recognise achievement more explicitly – in assemblies and through the use of diplomas. This has helped to 'make study cool' and also recognised a wide range of talents.

Strong and decisive leadership at all levels has been critical in bringing about school transformation and maintaining an inclusive approach. Nossebro School has been influenced by the work of Lorraine Monroe who, as a principal, successfully turned around a low-performing school in Harlem, New York. The school took on board Monroe's approach to 'vision plus action' and the need for decisive leadership and structure and stability for both learners and staff. Monroe emphasises the benefits of collaborative leadership, but says that:

*... there comes a time when a boss has to look at his or her staff and say, 'OK, I've heard you, there's validity in what you're saying, but we have to move ahead, and here's what we are going to do' (Checkley, 2004, p. 71).*

In Nossebro, the leadership of the school was shared, but clear roles were set out. As stated above, some administrative tasks were removed to free up time for leadership, including the pedagogical leadership needed to put the vision into action. The school leadership team, however, retained authority and was able to effectively 'manage' the school organisation, taking difficult decisions when necessary. The background of one of the current principals in special education was seen as a particular strength.

Leadership is 'distributed' in the sense that leaders emerged at all levels within the school. Strong leadership was adopted by teachers in their classrooms. The school changed a previous idea that learners should be allowed to carry full responsibility for their behaviour and progress. A new understanding was adopted that learners needed adult support – teachers were to be 'authoritative', not 'authoritarian'.



## Support structures in the classroom

'It is the teaching situation and the context around the pupil that need to change. Not the pupil' (Nossebro website).

One approach to improving learning was through increased learning time. This is effectively achieved through the use of starter activities which are written on the whiteboard before learners enter for the lesson. Such activities may include, for example, a re-cap of previous work, collecting materials for the lesson or reading a text. It means that learners immediately know what to do and time is not lost.

The lesson goals and the lesson end time are also displayed on the whiteboard, along with other key points about the lesson plan. For some learners, individual schedules are also used to remind learners what to focus on. This structure and predictability has benefitted all learners. Teachers report a calmer atmosphere with less need for talk in the form of basic instructions as all the information needed is on the whiteboard. When the learners enter the classroom they know what to do, which helps the lesson begin immediately and makes better use of teacher time, allowing them to focus on any learners who might need more explanations.

Teachers say that, in using this approach, they need to be focused and well-prepared for lessons, but one teacher new to the school reported that the structure helped her to 'become better quickly'.

Within the structure, there is scope for flexibility and a whole range of tools for learning are used with whole class, small group, pair and individual work. Such approaches encourage collaboration, but allow learners to become increasingly independent in their learning. Special education teachers, in particular, may have many different strategies and teachers work together to find the best tools needed for different situations.

Persson (2012) researching the changes in Nossebro, recognised that pedagogical differentiation and individualisation should be understood as more than a question of working methods and prioritisation of content. She says:

*The fact that the teacher provides students with information at a level deemed appropriate by the students' potential for learning is no guarantee that the learning goals are reached (p. 4).*

With two teachers and/or more focused use of teacher time, interaction and follow-up with learners is more effective, allowing improved tracking of learner understanding and achievement of goals.

The mix of a class/subject teacher and a special education teacher in the classroom has had a positive effect and, although special education teachers report that sometimes teachers want a quick fix, they increasingly realise the need to talk through new strategies and review and adapt, making best use of their own competences. Teachers appreciate the time and support they receive in particular from co-teaching with colleagues (now these colleagues are not necessarily special education teachers). They report that this support is successful as it is very concrete and geared towards learners in the classroom.

In summary, teaching approaches that create learning opportunities for everyone have replaced former strategies that were clearly failing many learners. While teachers focus on developing knowledge and understanding – not quick fixes – the belief that all learners can achieve is a key driver. As one teacher explained, 'without heart, it is just a technique'.



## Curriculum and assessment

'We have individual tabs on every pupil and our goal is to give support before the pupil feels that he or she failed' (Nossebro website).

The curriculum in Nossebro is the same for all learners (except for eight learners with more severe learning difficulties in the Särskola, who follow different syllabi and knowledge requirements). The emphasis is on knowledge and, following the inclusion of all learners from segregated classes, the importance of high expectations and appropriate pace of work has been recognised. The move towards more inclusive practice has also highlighted the benefits to all learners of access to subject expertise as well as pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Teacher time is used effectively and staff get to know their learners well, recognising a need for extra support as soon as it arises. Learners are involved in their own assessment, through discussions with teachers and via their logbooks.

Learners, when consulted, were found to be good at describing their strengths and weaknesses. Seeing their ideas put into practice also motivated them to be more involved in their own learning.

On-going, formative assessment is, therefore, used to strengthen instruction and raise achievement by means of clear learning intentions and appropriate learning experiences and the provision of feedback to learners, encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning.

### Support for professional development

*It was important not to lean on own opinions and old traditions that would permeate our work. The current research would contribute to a secure and stable base to work from* (Nossebro website).

The development process for all stakeholders started with research. The literature (based on a reading list from the special pedagogues course at a local university) was summarised by school leaders and given to all staff. Time was allocated to reading and discussing together. This not only increased staff knowledge of current practice (evidence-based), but also staff's knowledge of each other and respect for each other.

In this way, knowledge was developed about practice and for practice – and then put into practice with support from colleagues. This made it possible to connect learning to teachers' own experience and provided a common language and concepts for reflection and discussion.

In the classroom, there are often two teachers working together. This gives two perspectives on every lesson. The teachers realise the benefits of support from colleagues for themselves as well as benefits for learners. Approximately 40% of lessons have two teachers (Swedish, English, maths). Teachers say that co-operative teaching is the best form of competence training. All teachers are continually looking for new strategies and value feedback from colleagues. Under the new arrangements, teachers work more flexibly and are happy to use some time (resource time) to support colleagues.

When some teachers struggled with the new ideas, the school leaders were very supportive and ready to talk – not always about the 'higher level processes', but about the practical things that concern teachers.

Both teachers and school leaders felt that they needed to 'do it for themselves – together' – that they could not be told what to do by external experts and also that there were no quick fixes. The approach to professional learning through collaboration, with discussion of



issues of interest, reflection and feedback from colleagues was also felt to raise the status of teachers in the community.

The Head of Education and Social Services feels strongly that the most workable factor is not to be sent to an external lecture, but to work with colleagues, getting positive and negative critique and help in actual practice. However, some specific opportunities were arranged focusing on autism and on maths. The school also received some external support from the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, consisting of counselling to create a transparent model to support understanding of the cause and effects of the situation in 2007. Support was also received from researchers at a local university college. This helped all staff to collect loosely connected thoughts together and think through how to adapt knowledge to the school's own context.

### **Support for learner and family involvement**

Since 2007, parents have been more closely involved in school development. Parents were also provided with the summarised research literature, so were 'on-board' with key messages. The parents interviewed during the Agency visit value the increased focus on knowledge, but also value the development of social and life skills and skills for work. They note that a balance is needed.

In recent years, communication with parents has also improved. Meetings are held twice per term, with weekly communication by SMS and emails. In this way, support can be provided to families quickly if problems arise.

Parents particularly appreciate the extra support available in homework and holiday clubs, as this avoids the scenario of learners and parents struggling with difficulties at home (and continuing to struggle even when teachers have not succeeded). The school coach also plays an important role in supporting parents and families.

The culture of the school, based as it is around the rights of child, encourages learner involvement in many ways.

The Learner Council is used to gather and communicate learner views to school staff and also to reinforce teacher messages among learners.

The learners interviewed during the Agency visit, from grades 8 and 9, felt that relationships with teachers were very good, but that teachers did retain authority and were respected. They were also very positive about additional supports such as mentors and counsellors and appreciated the help available in the homework and holiday clubs, in particular if they did not have help at home.

Learners feel that they can ask for and get help from their teachers and expressed the view that the lesson structure used in Nossebro helps learning. One learner said, 'You don't sit and wait... you are one step ahead.'

Learners feel that teachers 'see everyone in the class... they don't leave anyone behind' and like having two teachers in the classroom as this means extra attention for everyone.

Learners say that they are encouraged to help each other and a move from a specific group to help support certain learners to an acceptance that 'everyone helps each other' is again a positive development. Recognising the importance of acceptance and belonging, one learner highlighted 'it's about friends.'

### **Resources for learner support**

*What makes this case significant is that the urgent work to improve the school was not a project run with enhanced resources. Instead, the municipality interpreted the*



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*policy documents, took note of the relevant research, used tried and tested approaches, and designed its own development model (Persson, 2012, p. 15).*

As the above quote from Persson (2012) explains, Nossebro School did not have any additional resources to carry out the transformation. Existing resources – a high proportion of which were being used to support separate special classes with poor outcomes – were re-distributed and used to greater effect. Teachers are happy to work more flexibly, allowing a system of support that is more responsive to the needs of learners.



## INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

The transformation of Nossebro School and the move from segregated provision based on learner difficulties to an inclusive approach with collective responsibility has led to an impressive rise in academic results. The school moved from among the bottom of the 290 municipalities in Sweden to among the top three in Grade 9 examination results.

The changes made at Nossebro clearly had an impact on all stakeholder groups – school and community leaders, teachers, parents and learners. The changes in attitudes and values and consequent changes in practice and in relationships have not only led to improved academic results, but also to better motivation, self-esteem, confidence, well-being and resilience in both teachers and learners.

This achievement was not only important for the municipality as a whole. It means that there have been a substantial number of learners from Nossebro over the past five years who, instead of experiencing failure at school and probable difficulties in employment, have been able to achieve the necessary results to continue their upper secondary education and progress into valued careers.

By including all learners and providing sensitive support, the school has become more equitable. One teacher told us that previously:

*... the pupils who wanted good grades worked a lot at home and their parents did a lot of work too and those pupils who didn't have parents who were well-educated didn't get any help at all so they just fell out.*

The move to a rights-based approach helps to address the problem faced by many countries as the numbers of learners seen to be in need of special education continues to rise. The right of all learners to early support, to teacher expertise in all subjects as well as appropriate support for learning is founded on social justice – and learners should not have to 'leave to learn' (Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis, 2008, p. 3).



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## SUSTAINING THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS

*For the future, it is not important to defend the leading position in the rankings. What matters is the extent to which 'changed perspective' has become entrenched and how stable and robust school activities will be against different types of challenges and pressures (Persson, 2012, p. 14).*

Community and school leaders in Essunga talked about the difficulties they now face in sustaining change. Having managed to achieve so much by themselves, they feel the need to 'take back power' and not be distracted by the media and outside attention that success has brought. While external support can help in some practical ways, e.g. helping to identify key challenges on which to focus, external experts should not take over.

The Head of Education and Social Services stressed the need to continue to study new research in order to maintain the cutting edge and gain 'new knowledge for new types of learner, new ideas, new strategies', but he stressed that the direction should remain the same. The school needs to select new teachers who are ready to embrace school's inclusive values and approach and the Essunga story must be told with the emphasis on the 'school for all' and the importance of attitude of mind.

One teacher interviewed said:

*To reach all is the challenge and why, because no matter how much you read about disabilities, the person is new, every year you confront new pupils... It is a pressure on the teacher to handle all these pupils... but I'm convinced that's the best thing for all the pupils.*

There is a firm belief that, if the school can get better at meeting the needs of learners in need of additional support, it can better help all learners. However, the school explained that the challenges are increasing, with around 30% of learners now having some kind of additional need. This may well impact on academic results and there is therefore also a need to communicate to the community and the media the importance of other areas of learning – and wider measures of success.



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## KEY LEARNING POINTS AND AREAS OF FURTHER DISCUSSION

The Agency visit provided an opportunity for the leadership team in Nossebro to reflect on its school development and discuss both the factors that supported the school development and some of the challenges that remain, if the school is to sustain the changes made.

The following were influential factors in the transformation of the school:

- collaborative leadership to manage complex change;
- the use of research evidence to support changes in attitudes, thinking and practice;
- the development of supportive structures for all learners (e.g. through lesson structure, co-teaching, additional support).

In addition, the following may require further consideration and may form the focus of further work in the Agency's Organisation of Provision project:

- collaborative working to provide additional support for learners with more complex needs (with external services);
- provision of support to schools (by external organisations) to increase capacity and sustain change.



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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

*A key question is what characterises a school where staff work with an inclusive perspective and where the results are good not only in terms of performance but also when it comes to students' and teachers' social interaction, enjoyment and experience of meaningfulness (Persson, 2012, p. 3).*

As is evident from this report, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is integral to the Swedish way of thinking. However, during the Agency visit, it was noted that Essunga has shown 'how to do it' in practice. Such practice cannot be replicated, but it is possible to learn from the strategies and processes identified above which can be adapted to different contexts.

The changes have developed resilient staff, able to deal with constant change and new challenges – with the 'will' (motivation) and the 'skill' (capacity) to support all learners (Levin, 2008). The staff in Nossebro note, 'We see clear examples each day, pupils who previously were picked out from the classroom, succeed today in the classroom'.

The Chief Executive (Head of Education and Social Services) stressed that the target group is ALL learners. He notes:

*It is possible to change a school with the same politicians, school management and teaching staff.*

*It is possible to connect inclusion with good achievement.*

*It is possible to change a school with the resources available.*

*It is possible to change the approach towards learners, parents and ourselves.*



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