Discourses of Including Students with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) in Swedish Mainstream Schools

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING
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Abstract


When students’ behaviours cause difficulties for their teachers, themselves, and the rest of the class, teachers often construct inclusion as problematic. The overall aim of this study was to contribute to the understanding of teachers’ discourses regarding inclusion of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in Swedish mainstream schools. The sample of empirical data collected for articles II–IV was derived from focus group interviews of 5–8 mainstream teachers in grades 4–6 in 6 different schools. Article I is a research synthesis on 15 studies that feature the attitudes of teachers from 15 different countries. It frames the entire thesis by examining how teachers perceive students with EBD from other countries, cultures, and times. In this study, neither inclusion nor EBD are said to be so much objectively “real” as socially produced and can be regarded as social constructs. An approach of discourse theory that takes inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe (1985) is applied in articles II–III and is complemented with constructionist thematic analysis. The results revealed that teachers construct meaning and understanding of students in relation to their everyday professional missions in the classroom. Discourses about successfully including students with EBD face problem fixing their meaning as they require new and other types of resources as well as other time distributions, teachers, curricula, and classrooms. The teachers’ discourses revealed a clear gap between policy and practice in the Swedish education system. Discourses that were pragmatic based on everyday reality of the school overpowered the discourses of ensuring equal opportunities for all students and the celebration of diversity. When the wordings of the Swedish steering documents are arbitrary and interpreted differently among various actors within Swedish schools, the teachers feel insecurity, frustration, and inadequacy. Inclusion of students with EBD is a complex and complicated matter that the teachers do not feel competent enough to fully handle. They revealed their frustration with being expected to do something that cannot be done due to practical and economic reasons. When teachers experience failure and dissatisfaction with specific teaching situations, they construct discourses that justify and legitimize that failure. These discourses inevitably have consequences for how the teachers understand and organize their everyday teacher missions.

Keywords: emotional and behavioural difficulties, focus group interviews, inclusion, inclusive didactics, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, mainstream schools, teachers’ discourses.