

ABSTRACT

- Title:** The power to define – A study of how decision makers formulate conditions for special education practices
- ISBN:** 91 - 7346 - 494 - 5
- Language:** Swedish with an English summary
- Keywords:** Special education, special needs definitions, special education policies, management, steering and guidance, municipal policy, discourse analysis.

The present study is part of a research project called School and the Normal Variation in Students' Preconditions – focusing on how education meets the variation of pupils conditions. The aim of the study is to map and analyse processes at municipality leadership levels, which embody the construction of discourses. These processes lead to definitions of which children and youth will be "pupils in need of special support" and decisions of a policy-making nature about what special education practices should be used.

The study relates to the context of multidimensional theoretical approaches, especially critical discourse analysis and structuration theory as the main contribution to the theoretical framework and perspectives. A case study design and an abductive analysis provide the main basis for problem.

Interviews of ten informants – six politicians and four senior civil servants from one Swedish municipality provide the main part of empirical data. The analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of seven different discourses, which could be related to the three main research questions. These discourses represent value positions that have been found from analysing the transcribed interviews. Four of the seven discourses could be understood as belonging to a limitation value base area: Individual limitations (i), normality limitations (ii), institutional limitations (iii) and structural limitations (iv). Views of the second area are shown in two discourses: School institution as value base (v) and difference as value base (vi). The third area is recognised as a discourse named combination of management (vii).

The discourses can also be understood as one dynamic and overruling discourse comprising discursive consensus and/or conflicts. In this sense the analysis shows an existing horizontal line of assumptions, rather than a vertical, hierarchical one. According to this horizontal line perspective, power is constructed through a kind of non-management policy culture, which formulates conditions for education practices, but is in fact mainly adjustively constructed according to traditional school work patterns and value systems.