

Summary

High quality in schools and other institutions that meet children contributes to fewer children with special educational needs. Yet children are individuals with individual needs and general measures are unlikely to cater for all children and be adequate in all schools. In order to prevent and avoid school failures, it may therefore be motivated to further focus measures by targeting society's resources and adapt institutions in order to meet children in need for special support. In order to successfully focus resources towards children with the largest needs it is necessary to know which children these are. Such knowledge is necessary if schools and teachers are to adapt to and address the needs of these children.

There is evidence that children's learning difficulties are sometimes revealed so late that they have already begun to manifest themselves in poor school performance, lack of motivation and behavioral problems. The aim of this report is to analyze whether and how it is possible to improve the support for children who are at risk of falling behind in school. Based on theoretical and empirical research about children's human capital development in general and more specifically reading development, behavioral problems and other kinds of learning problems, we discuss both how we can identify children with special needs, when it is desirable to do so and how we can support them, both with general and targeted measures. As a background to the analysis we present some empirical evidence on how the fraction of children failing to graduate from high school has evolved and on some of the consequences of poor compulsory school performance and based on register data from The National Board of Health and Welfare and Statistics Sweden.

Our main conclusion is that the work aimed to help children at risk could be more effective. There is sometimes lack of knowledge

both about how to identify that a child is in need of support, there is also insufficient knowledge about how to provide adequate support and whether the measures that are available actually work. Formally, the responsibility for the present situation rests with the municipalities. It is their responsibility to provide and monitor, evaluate and develop childcare and schools and other organizations that support for children with special needs. The overall responsibility however rests at national level. We therefore focus our policy recommendations on this level. This does not mean, that there is no need for change in the way municipalities organize the support for human capital development.

We assess that there is a need for a more active involvement of the State in providing the basic infrastructure for how to organize and develop society's support for child development. This infrastructure needs to be developed both with regard to how to adequately measure and follow child development, how to document the support provided to meet children's needs, how to generate new knowledge about which interventions work and about how support should optimally be organized, and importantly how to guarantee that knowledge about what interventions and practices work in fact reach those who work with child development.

An important argument for why this responsibility rests with the State is that knowledge about how society's support for child development is organized at the local level and about the results achieved is essential if the State is to be able to demand that municipalities, counties and schools follow the law and work with evidence based methods. Another reason is that it is necessary for the national production of knowledge to have an infrastructure in place that is capable of generating new knowledge. A well designed infrastructure around child development can serve as a tool for the professions that work with children to improve their support for the individual child's development and as a tool for the society as a whole to follow and develop the quality in different institutions over time.

Although collecting information about child development and practices does not automatically lead to improved practices, perhaps the most important argument for why we need a well-developed infrastructure in this area is that children's development and future are too important to continue the current "trial-and-error"-approach. It is wasteful not to make an attempt to make

better use all the valuable knowledge and experience that already exist at the local level. Absent a more transparent and systematic approach evaluation and documentation it is not possible for the State, voters or parents to hold local politicians accountable for badly run preschools, elementary schools and child health institutions.