

3. Special education professions from an international perspective

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Introduction

This chapter is a brief overview of research regarding special educational professions in different contexts. We will primarily present research focusing on Sweden and Germany but will also make comparisons to other Nordic and English-speaking countries in Europe. As Chapter 2 in this volume describes both the historical emergence of special educators (SEs) in Sweden and Germany and their current function in their respective education systems, the purposes of this chapter are primarily comparative, and it aims to clarify what is known about the work and values of special education professions in various national contexts.

There are a number of research reviews available on SEs. However, many are relatively limited to specific knowledge interests. If, for example, the study is about the work of SEs in preschools (cf. Gåreskog, 2020), their collaboration with other professions (Paulsrød & Nilholm, 2023), or about their work with newly arrived immigrant pupils (Johansson, 2022), this is naturally reflected in the research reviews' selection. It can, therefore, be difficult to create an overall picture of previous research, not least with regard to the international perspective, as many research reviews study specifically Swedish or Nordic issues such as preschool classes or after-school centres (cf. Magnússon, 2023a). Most comparative studies have focused on Finland, Sweden and Norway (Gåreskog & Lindqvist, 2020) and have illustrated many interesting commonalities and differences, especially with other Nordic countries (e.g., Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Cameron et al., 2018; Sundqvist, von Ahlefeld Nisser & Ström, 2014; Takala et al., 2015; Takala & Ahl, 2014). This field of research has, however, been quite fragmented and lacked a comprehensive overview (see Magnússon, 2024 for a summary in Swedish). Some important conclusions can be drawn, however, as regards the contextual differences that can, in turn, be related to political and social developments.

As discussed in this book, the project we report on here follows up and builds upon a previous seminal project on SEs (Göransson et al., 2015). The project report from that research project (Göransson et al., 2015) also contains a brief overview of international research on the special education professions in more general terms based on three different themes, namely: knowledge base and values (what is primarily expressed in their training), tasks (what is regarded as their professional practice), and claims of legitimacy and jurisdiction (what they think of their profession and perceived status). Rather than organising the chapter around specific countries, this thematic division is also used here to construct a better image of the SEs as professionals in an international context.

A note of caution

Before presenting the results of this international research review, it is important to point out that comparisons of different professions between countries should be made with some caution. In addition to obvious differences between countries in terms of population, language and the organisation of the school system, there are political, historical, and contextual differences that affect perceptions of education, school professions, teacher education and the training of specialised professions, pupil diversity and difference, and how these issues should be addressed. For example, Takala et al. (2015) point to important contextual differences between Sweden and Finland when it comes to teacher education and special needs teacher education – in terms of content, status and organisation. Since the 1970s, teacher education in Finland has been an advanced-level programme that ends with a master's degree. Historically, the programme has had a high status and many applicants. Moreover, teachers have generally enjoyed great respect in society (this seems to be changing in recent years, however, cf. Sundqvist et al., 2019; Takala et al., 2015). This has historically not been the case in many of the other countries we compare with here. For instance, in Sweden, teacher education programmes are with few exceptions on the first cycle level and finish with a professional degree rather than a master's degree. For several decades, Swedish teacher education programmes have had problems with low application rates and high attrition; teacher education is frequently reformed, and the status of both the teacher profession and teacher education is low in public discourse (Edling & Liljestrand, 2019; Mikhaylova, Pettersson &

Magnússon, 2024). In Germany, the SEs have their roots in the work of special schools, a tradition that lies closer in time as the German education system is still more stratified than the Nordic education systems (Grummt, 2019; Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018). Such differences naturally feed into the status of SEs and their relationship to general teachers.

Obviously, cultural and historical differences affect the recruitment of students to postgraduate programmes leading to professional degrees in special education. Teacher education is, after all, conducive and connected to the education and practice of SEs, albeit to a different degree in different countries. In addition, SEs are not entirely comparable between countries. In Norway, for example, there is a professional group with the term 'special pedagogue', while in Denmark and Finland the term is 'special needs teacher', and in Sweden, there are both 'special teachers' and 'special pedagogues' (in this book termed special needs teachers and special education pedagogues, respectively). Denmark also has a long history of the extensive use of segregating organisational solutions where pupils have attended various types of special schools (Egelund, 2010). This changed to some extent with a major reform in 2014 that sought to make Danish schools more inclusive (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2024). Despite this, Danish pupils with special needs are significantly more likely to be educated in different types of segregated and special schools compared to other Nordic countries, and to an increasing degree (Cameron et al., 2024; Keles, ten Braak & Munthe, 2022; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2024). In contrast, Sweden, compared to Finland, Iceland and Norway, has a long tradition of special schools, although a small proportion of pupils attend them (Keles, ten Braak & Munthe, 2022), and the use of segregated environments is growing (Barow & Magnússon, 2024; Giota, Lace & Emanuelsson, 2022; Malmqvist & Nilholm, 2016). One consequence of such contextual differences is that a special education pedagogue in Norway, for example, may encounter pupils with considerably more extensive disabilities in mainstream schools than a special needs teacher in Sweden (Jortveit et al., 2019).

Finally, countries like England and Sweden have gone much further than many other European countries as regards the marketisation and privatisation of the education system. This marketisation has led to extended segregation following class, ethnicity, the need for special educational support, as well as the provision of support (Alexadiou et al., 2016; Dovemark et al., 2018;

Magnússon, 2020; Ramberg, 2015; Tah, 2021; Thomas, Dobson & Loxley, 2022). We should, therefore, be careful in drawing inferences and conclusions on a general level. However, the different countries' varying systems and the specialised professions' prerequisites for education and work can both inform and enrich each other, which in turn makes comparisons even more important (Haustätter & Takala, 2008; Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). Knowledge and values of special professions

In this section, we will focus on the knowledge and values that SEs and special needs teachers seem to have in their practice and acquire through their training. The abbreviation SENCO (special educational needs coordinator) is a common translation of the Swedish term for special education pedagogue (specialpedagog) (cf. Lindqvist, 2013; Magnússon, 2015), as such a professional group exists in both England and Ireland, for example. Thus, many previous studies of that group in the Nordic context have used that term. However, becoming a SENCO in England or Ireland does not require a completed teacher training programme or an advanced university degree. Thus, although their practice may be similar and have similar theoretical foundations, their training is qualitatively different from Sweden (cf. Abbott, 2007; Cole, 2005; Szwed, 2007; Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009).

In the Nordic countries, on the other hand, SEs undertake training at the university level, although the requirements and standardisation of the contents of the programmes vary between countries. In, for instance, Denmark and Norway, the organisation and contents of the programmes are less structured than in Finland and Sweden (Cameron et al., 2024). In general, special education professionals in the Nordic countries are also more interested in developing inclusive practices than, for example, teachers and school leaders, although there are some differences between countries (cf. Cameron et al., 2024; Lindqvist, 2013). This can, to some extent, be related to their training (Göransson et al., 2015; Göransson et al., 2019; Magnússon, 2015), which includes looking at school from a critical or relational perspective (Nilholm, 2006) where the focus is on designing inclusive school programmes.

In Germany, many studies have already been conducted among teachers and students to ascertain their attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive teaching. Not only special education teachers and students were surveyed, but also all other teaching professions: primary school teachers, secondary school

teachers and grammar school teachers. Lorenz, Peperkorn and Schäffer (2020) systematically summarised the prior research on attitudes toward inclusion and found that teachers' attitudes are linked to the specific profession. As in the Nordic countries, SEs have the most positive attitude towards inclusive teaching. In contrast, Gebhardt et al. (2011) have shown that SEs in Austria had the lowest approval for inclusive teaching. In Germany, Kuhl et al. (2013) and Trumpa et al. (2014) suggest that the attitudes of primary school teachers and secondary school teachers towards inclusion are similarly positive when it comes to general support for inclusive education, but the differences between individuals mostly relate to other issues, such as the perceived closeness to pupils with disabilities.

The Nordic countries have a long history of attempting to create a 'school for all', an inclusive ambition that, while initially focused on providing all pupils with education in Christianity and reading, later evolved towards creating a common school for the different economic classes of society (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014; Magnússon & Pettersson 2021). Thus, the Nordic countries were working towards more inclusive practices long before the Salamanca Declaration was signed in 1994, yet it has taken a long time to incorporate these ambitions into policy documents such as curricula and school laws (Keles, ten Braak & Munthe, 2022; Egelund & Dyssegård, 2019; Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015; Sundqvist et al., 2019). Although the Nordic countries have similar criteria for defining which pupils fall within the scope of special needs education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASIE), 2018), the identification of these pupils usually involves an educational survey with a team corresponding to the Swedish student health team, which includes several special professional groups, both from within and outside the schools.

The history and use of special schools in the Nordic countries is also complex and long (Egelund, 2010; Keles, ten Braak & Munthe, 2022; Haustätter & Takala, 2008; Magnússon, 2024) as is the general introduction, interpretation and implementation of inclusion in both policy and practice (Keles, ten Braak & Munthe, 2022; Egelund & Dyssegård, 2019; Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015; Magnússon, 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2019; Jortveit, Tveit, Cameron & Lindqvist, 2020; Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Takala et al., 2012; Takala, Pirttimäa, and Törmänen, 2009). This, in turn, affects what roles and tasks are seen as belonging to the SEs.

Explanations for special support needs

When it comes to how SEs explain the emergence of various difficulties, a comparative study between Norway and Sweden has indicated that Norwegian SEs explain children's difficulties from a more categorical perspective than do their Swedish counterparts (Jortveit, Tveit, Cameron & Lindqvist, 2020), while Swedish SEs more often explain children's need for support in terms of system- or teaching factors. These explanations, such as teachers lacking special educational skills or didactic knowledge, or schools lacking the conditions to meet children's differences, are more common in Sweden than Norway, while individual children's disabilities or characteristics are more often used in Norway (Gäreskog, 2020; Johansson, 2022).

However, the differences are greater between Sweden and Finland than between Norway and Sweden, and this is partly due to a different understanding of special support, its application and who does it. In Finland, special educational needs support, including special education, is seen as part of inclusive work – especially special education that does not require specific individual documentation and action plans (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Takala et al., 2012; Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009).

As Haustätter and Takala (2008) point out, it is not surprising that different countries' conceptualisations of inclusion can explain some of the differences between countries when it comes to the practical work around special support. Finland has been relatively person-centred and traditional in its understanding of special needs education, focusing primarily on individual and emergent learning problems, as well as the assessment and evaluation of pupil progress. In addition, it uses a multi-tiered scale of special support where most people may need support at some point, but only a few receive the most intensive support. At the same time, a large proportion of Finnish pupils receive special support and individual tuition during their schooling. Special education support is operationalised in small groups, and intensive, often individualised, training is used. In other words, the pupil is the focus of Finnish explanations of problems compared to the greater focus on the organisation and the teacher – at least in theory – in Sweden and Norway (Haustätter & Takala, 2008; Saloviita, 2009).

The Finnish perspective on inclusion described above differs quite strongly from Norway and Sweden, where inclusion linked to a relational perspective has had a relatively dominant role in the education of SEs (Göransson et al.,

2015, 2018; Haug, 1998; 2017). In Finland, the traditional perspective has been more contested, and attempts have been made to limit the use of special education to advocate for individualised teaching (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009; Harju-Luukkainen, 2024). In recent years, however, the inclusive ambitions have been challenged both in Norway and Sweden, especially in the public debate (Bagger & Lillvist, 2021; Bengtsson & Göransson, 2023; Magnússon, 2023b). At the same time, both Finnish and Swedish special education students studying towards the special needs teaching profession seem to expect to work with students in both segregated and inclusive settings (Takala et al., 2015). It has also been shown that they rarely discuss critical issues such as resource allocation and values around special needs education in their training (Lindqvist, Thornberg & Lindqvist, 2020).

In Germany, general teachers feel less prepared to teach inclusive classes (Opalinski & Benkmann, 2012). At the same time, they often reject responsibility for situations in which inclusion supposedly fails (cf. Bengel & Ludwig, 2024). As Bengel (2021) has illustrated, teachers have a ‘tendency to a middle position’, as neither completely rejecting nor fully agreeing on inclusion as a value for general education, and there are differences in terms of how they deal with pupils with disabilities where they are more critical of teaching pupils with behavioural problems (Lorenz et al., 2020; Gebhardt et al., 2011; Opalinski & Benkmann, 2012). Kuhl et al. (2013) state that these differences in attitudes toward inclusion or pupils with disabilities already manifest themselves during or even before they enter the specific teacher education programmes. These views indicate that the role of SEs is of high importance in Germany – which has a much more differentiated and tracked education system than many other European countries (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Becoming a special educator

Despite the differences in understanding special needs education, there are several positive similarities to report regarding training. A recent comparative study of special needs educators in Sweden and Norway found that the special needs education programmes they had completed had prepared them well for their current work (Cameron et al., 2018). The two countries showed strong similarities between the programmes, particularly in terms of subject areas, organisation and structure, but also some differences – such as

the Swedish programme focusing more on social goals, teacher supervision and collaboration, school development and promoting inclusion. However, special needs teachers in both countries felt that they were very well prepared to work with children with a range of general school difficulties, such as attention problems, social and emotional problems, as well as disabilities and diagnoses such as intellectual disabilities and literacy difficulties. On the other hand, they were less likely to feel prepared for work with maths difficulties, motor difficulties and hearing and visual impairments. Cameron et al. (2018) concluded that this is something to take seriously, although these difficulties may be less likely to manifest themselves than others.

The tasks of special educators

This section will focus more on the work the professions do and the areas of work they claim to have jurisdiction over. The latter part is treated sparingly in the previous research, which means that the focus is primarily on current practice. In general, it can be noted that professional groups working specifically with special educational issues in schools have historically had difficulties establishing and maintaining their legitimacy and defining their role and jurisdiction both in Sweden and internationally (Abbott, 2007; Cole, 2005; Lingard, 2001; Pearson, 2008; Szwed, 2007a, 2007b). This can be explained to some extent by the fact that their practices are often adapted to the local needs of the individual school, meaning that the work is contextualised from the inside rather than defined and delimited from the outside (Mackenzie, 2007). Göransson et al. (2015) and Klang et al. (2017) have exemplified this with the variety of the professional roles of SEs in Sweden, where the role was up for negotiation between the individual, the employer, and the workplace. To some extent, there is also an overlap between the areas of work of the two professions in Sweden, special education pedagogues and special needs teachers (cf. also Magnússon, Göransson & Nilholm, 2016). Still, while special education pedagogues, in particular, act as a kind of odd-job-handyman in some schools, it is possible to identify a broad and relatively limited jurisdiction for the two professional groups (see also Göransson et al., 2019). The roles of the Swedish SEs, however, seem to have developed more clearly in more distinct directions in recent years, with the special needs teachers doing much more teaching

and the special education pedagogues being more involved in consultation and cooperation (cf. Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024).

Researchers have disagreed on whether the solution to the problem of unclear jurisdiction was to create clear and centralised (policy) definitions of the work of professionals (Cole, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011) or whether the flexibility and contextual adaptability of the work would be more advantageous for the profession (Lingard, 2001; Szwed, 2007a; 2007b). The argument in favour of flexibility and adaptability was that individual practitioners would be more empowered in their work and that the profession should be more accessible and adaptable to the specific needs of schools. The argument in favour of defining the professional role more clearly in policy documents, on the other hand, is that it could help to delimit the tasks and prevent SEs from becoming a kind of all-purpose profession that handles everything from administration to being temporary staff. This in turn could also contribute to the legitimacy of the profession in the eyes of the public and colleagues (cf. Magnússon, Göransson & Nilholm, 2016). The recent Nordic comparison of Cameron et al. (2024) reinforce the idea, as the roles of the SEs seem to be stronger in countries with legislative protection of their roles in the education system and clearer structures for their education.

The difficulty for SEs to establish their professional role and status within schools may also have been influenced by the paradigm shift that took place in special education in the 1980s and 1990s. The *raison d'être* of special needs education was then strongly questioned from several quarters, through a sociological criticism of it as an institutional practice that disadvantaged certain social groups, philosophical criticism of it as a scientific field and political criticism of the professions' exercise of power (cf. Skrtic, 1991). Thus, confidence was eroded not only in the knowledge base and professions of special education but also, by extension, in the basic assumptions of special education; namely, that disabilities are the primary explanations for school problems, that diagnoses are objective, that special needs education is a rational and coherent system of services that benefit pupils, and that success is a rational and predictable process (Skrtic, 1991; cf. Magnússon, 2015). This in turn, had far reaching consequences for the SEs, as the professional and scientific basis of their profession was effectively criticised and questioned.

The paradigm shift be also exemplified with the German system's dynamics, where the history of special education professionalism was restricted to

and focused on those activities which were carried out by SEs within the special school system. Thus, a 'disability-related' professionalism has traditionally been proclaimed by the particular place of support (special school) and its responsibility for the corresponding student body (client reference) (Rauh, 2016). Thus, special schools can be seen as an identity-forming place for special needs educators (Grummt, 2019; Lindermeier, 2016), but they started to be questioned based on integrative/inclusive demands, which in turn led to challenges of special education as a discipline and profession. The demands for change have ranged from the requiring the dissolution of special education and SEs as a profession (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2004; Hansel, 2003; Schuhmann, 2014) to various attempts to re-define special education (and its professions) against the background of changed requirements (Feuser, 2013; Lindmeier, 2017) while still advocating for the preservation of the special education discipline.

Teaching or consulting?

Ultimately, the general criticism of special education as a field of knowledge and practice led to distrust of the special education profession as well. The consequences varied from country to country, but (as explained in Chapter 2) in Sweden it led to the replacement of special needs teachers, as a professional category in schools, by special education pedagogues with a completely new training programme. A similar development does not seem to have taken place in other countries, although special education has also taken a more relational direction there. For example, Finnish SEs work with pupils for most of their working time, while Swedish SEs often have a more supervisory or advisory role (Takala & Ahl, 2014). In Norway, special needs teachers also work more with guidance than teaching individual pupils (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014). Hence, as Taneja-Johansson & Powell (2024) argue, the policy trajectories of the different Nordic countries have in many ways led to increased divergence between them over time. This has direct implications for the work and values of the SEs, which have, for instance, been shown to have a weaker position in Norway and Denmark than in Sweden and Finland (Cameron et al., 2024).

SEs in England and Ireland often work in similar areas of work and in similar ways compared to Swedish SEs (Lindqvist, 2013; Magnússon, 2015), with a complex and broad role in schools and a general responsibility for

the organisation of education with regard to pupils with special needs (cf. Abbott, 2007; Cole, 2005; Layton, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Szwed, 2007; Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009). At the same time, Finnish researchers have shown that some SEs must work with tasks similar to those of special needs teachers in Finland (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009), that is, much work with individual teaching, teaching in small groups and co-teaching in pairs. This is further evidence of the difficulty of delimiting the professional role of the SEs in schools, where the tasks often include both generally formulated guidance and school development and more specifically formulated teaching.

As mentioned above, there are both similarities and differences between the professional roles in the Nordic countries. In Finland and Sweden, special needs teachers spend most of their time observing and teaching in small contexts, while special education pedagogues in Norway and Sweden mainly work with supervision, evaluation and documentation – Swedish ones, however, slightly more and increasingly so compared to the Norwegian ones (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Gåreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Takala & Ahl, 2014) – and liaise with school administrators and teachers (Jortveit et al., 2020). Such administrative tasks have increased in the last decade (Johansson, 2022; Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). For example, a study (Sundqvist et al., 2019) examined changes in the professional role of special needs teachers in a Swedish-speaking part of Finland, following a change in requirements regarding teachers' work with special support in their teaching. The study showed that individualised teaching continued to constitute a high proportion of SEs' work. This can be compared with Sweden and Norway, where direct work with pupils has decreased. Norwegian SEs, on the other hand, work more with guardians and external collaboration than the Swedish ones (Johansson, 2022; Jortveit et al., 2020; Paulsrud, 2022, 2024; Takala & Ahl, 2014).

When it comes to the actual tasks special needs teachers perform in inclusive schools, some differences between Germany and other countries can be found. The following task and competence areas (among others) were identified for special needs teachers working in Germany: Diagnostics, counselling, cooperation, individual support/learning support, support planning and internally differentiated teaching, and resource management, which are generally very closely related to special educational needs (Wolf et al., 2022). International studies refer less to specific tasks for special needs educators at

inclusive schools and more to inclusive educational competences: Counselling, cooperation, diagnostics and individual support or differentiation measures (Melzer et al., 2015; Kreis, Kosorok Labhart & Wick, 2014; Moser & Kropp, 2015; Werner & Quindt, 2014; Neumann et al., 2021). On top of that, there often is an asymmetrical relationship between mainstream teachers and special needs teachers, which is evident, for example, in the different areas of responsibility in schools and lessons. Tasks such as diagnostics, individual support, materials management and parent counselling are primarily delegated to special needs teachers (Kuhl et al., 2022), meaning that mainstream teachers often attribute sole responsibility for dealing with pupils with special educational needs to them (Bengel & Adl-Amini, 2025, Katzenbach & Olde. 2007). This type of special education professionalism can be linked to an emphasis on the use of a diagnosis, and therefore special education (and inclusion of pupils) can be assumed to be viewed as something 'extra' or additive. It thus decouples special education from other everyday school tasks (Grummt, 2019) with the practical consequences of a division of labour, where the general teacher is primarily responsible for the students without special needs, the students with special needs often fall entirely under the responsibility of the SE (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018) and teachers reject responsibility for supporting pupils with needs (Sturm, 2015). It is therefore hardly surprising that SEs view themselves as supporters and advisors to mainstream school teachers (Ludwig et al., 2023, Grummt, 2019).

Decision-making power?

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the education systems of different countries operate with both specific and systematic differences in terms of the organisation of the system, its history and its boundaries and differentiation. For example, Cameron et al. (2024) point out that different countries have different policy frameworks both for special needs education as a tool in schools and for the role of SEs in schools and preschools. An example of this is a study (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014) which shows that school principals in both Norway and Sweden reported a decrease in the teaching responsibilities of SEs, although to very different degrees (55% in Sweden and 37% in Norway). At the same time, school principals felt that SEs had been given an increase in other tasks instead – mainly guidance and

consultation combined with school development and documentation (see also Chapter 9 in this volume). This can be seen as a positive development for SEs as it illustrates how different special educational perspectives vary over time and how they may influence which tasks are seen as desirable or appropriate for the profession. The above development goes hand-in-hand with an increase in the importance of the relational perspective (Nilholm, 2006), in which special needs educators in Norway and Sweden are largely educated during their studies.

Despite this, interventions with exclusionary solutions are commonly applied to pupils with special educational needs in both countries. In Finland, as mentioned earlier, SEs generally work in a more remedial manner and with smaller groups or individual teaching, as well as with preventive social work and co-teaching with teachers (Björk-Åman & Sundqvist, 2019; Sundqvist et al., 2019; Takala & Ahl, 2014). At the same time, it has been reported that SEs often feel overloaded with tasks, especially teaching, and that they therefore do not have the time or energy to participate in school development work (Johansson, Klang & Lindqvist, 2020; Paulsrud, 2024; see also Rosen-Webb, 2011). In Germany, a similar connection to the exclusionary history and practices of special education can be seen in how the work of the SEs is described, for instance, through terms like the ‘specialist’ (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018), the ‘ambulance’ (Reiser, 1998), the ‘firefighting brigade’ (Grummt, 2019) or as Kearns (2005) titles them – the ‘expert’ (Wermke & Beck, 2025). This can be compared to the terminology described in Göransson et al. (2015), where Swedish SEs were described as doing ‘odd-jobs’, being a ‘fire distinguisher’, or a ‘spider in the web’. In contrast, the new task that SEs are intended to do, such as consulting, interdisciplinary cooperation, and school development imply that SE no longer only work specifically with the children, but rather for the children through organisational measures (Kearns, 2005). This would likely add further to the generalist role of the SEs, and consequently, their workload, which has led several researchers (Grummt, 2019; Lindmeier, 2017; Rauh, 2016, Schildmann, 2015) to recommend the terminology ‘systemic work’ (*systemische Arbeit*), when discussing new, inclusive-oriented SE professionalism in Germany.

Nevertheless, it has also been indicated that cooperative relationships between German SEs and regular teachers in a shared setting are asymmetric. In this case, SEs are viewed as being responsible for making adjustments

and adapting to the regular teachers (Quante & Urbanek, 2021). Neumann (2019) has linked the topic of cooperation between special needs educators and regular teachers to the topic professional identity and argues that this does not seem to have what was presumed as a negative effect on professional autonomy. Similarly, Köpfer (2018) investigates the professional cooperation of special needs educators and regular teachers in inclusive settings with the use of the concept's negotiation of spatial order and expertise. As the cooperation between professionals takes place in a situational-spatial setting characterised by formal expertise, and as expertise is acquired in qualifications and professionalisation structures. By referencing the international discourse, it is concluded that teacher education in Germany lacks a structural embedding of content to cooperate in the context of inclusion and that the professionalisation of teachers should be guided towards an understanding of being a teacher for all pupils (Köpfer, 2018).

Conclusions

To summarise, we can conclude that SEs play an important role in the special education work of schools in several Western European countries. Nevertheless, we note that there are more extensive changes in their work in some countries compared to others. For example, SEs in Finland have a relatively stable professional role involving teaching and other direct work with pupils, while special needs professionals in Sweden and Norway have increasingly taken on administrative and supervisory tasks. We can also see that Sweden has a more stable base in a relational perspective compared to Finnish and Norwegian practices, which tend to be more individual-oriented in line with a traditional perspective. Denmark also has a tradition of segregated solutions, and despite trying to phase-out special schools based on diagnoses, the country has a rising frequency of special education. That, in combination with a relatively unclear and undefined education and role for SEs, may have slippery-slope type of consequences where the previous norm of segregating education returns. A similar argument has been made as regards Germany, where the SEs' legitimacy and knowledge base, developed within a highly differentiated education system, and the knowledge base of regular teachers, are relatively decoupled. This leads to difficulties in

developing new ways of thinking and working with special education, where the SEs remain specialists.

However, it is clear that both similarities and differences between countries are rooted in traditions, on the one hand, and contextual conditions on the other. Special needs teachers generally have more teaching-oriented tasks, while SEs work more on supervision, documentation and school development. SENCOs in England and Ireland, on the other hand, seem to have a more mixed role. Historically, these professional groups have had difficulty asserting themselves and gaining a clear jurisdiction, but there are some differences between countries where, for example, Finland and Sweden have had a relatively clear professional role and clear tasks for special needs teachers.

The conclusions we can draw from this chapter are that the SEs not only have lessons to learn from other countries, but can also exemplify a relatively unique situation as regards how different states use specific professions as tools to sort out various problems in schools.

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