

7. Professions in motion: Special education professions mirrored in German and Swedish union journals since the 2000s

Wieland Wermke, Heidi Wimmer, Andreas Andersson and Kristina Röing Arrias

Introduction

This chapter aims to explain the historical dynamics of German and Swedish special education professions between 2006 and 2021. For this aim, we have analysed union journals representing special educators (SEs) in both countries. Our overarching theme is the professionalisation of SEs within their specific contexts. Professionalisation depicts the change in the group of SEs over time. The group of SEs is closely linked to the global trend of inclusion described in the introduction chapter: inclusion and education standards. There is a lack of knowledge about how global trends have affected the profession of SEs over time. Understanding how the profession is changing thus provides insight into how the practices of inclusion and standardisation are changing in contexts where they can have both more and less impact. A temporal perspective must be taken to observe change, which is why the research covers the period from 2006 to 2021. The choice of this exact period is motivated by the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities was adopted in 2006. UN CRPD is of great importance to the global trend of inclusion. Therefore, it is assumed that the UN CRPD impacts the profession of special needs education and triggers changes within it.

In this study, we process a historical analysis of debates, articles and interviews in journals that direct themselves mainly toward an audience of SEs active in schools. In such journals, representatives of the national SE professions express beliefs on the appropriate form of their profession and its role in society and the school system. This chapter focuses on the Swedish journal ‘Specialpedagogik’ and the German ‘Zeitschrift für Heilpädagogik’ (Journal for Curative Education). Both are the biggest journals in their respective countries directed towards their national SE professions.

For the analyses, we employ a theoretical perspective that explains the process of professionalisation by suggesting several elements of this dynamic. In this chapter, we explain the nation-specific education, the structure of the profession, and the ideological foundation of the respective SE professions. Extensive analyses have been undertaken in two master theses. Andersson & Röing Arrias (2022) investigated the Swedish case and Wimmer (2022) the German. The chapter at hand presents a comparison of both countries, based on samples from their data.

The aspects of nation-specific findings are different. However, the aim of this comparison is to show that, although both countries are affected by global trends, their dynamics are different. Hence, the different themes emerging in the data serve as evidence to show the nation-specific particularities and their simultaneous interaction with both global and local conditions.

Methodology

A theoretical starting point to display dynamics in professions

In this chapter, we aim to investigate special education professions in time and space. This anticipates an analysing scheme, enabling us to display contextualised dynamics in the special education professions in focus. We use the concept of *professionalisation* as an analytical tool to consider the dynamic process whereby the special organisation changes certain attributes of a profession. An advantage here is that with a focus on a dynamic process, we avoid dichotomous categories. Harries-Jenkins (1970/2010) presents several elements of professionalisation, which she considers activities of the group. In total, the process can consist of six elements: activity, behavioural, context, educational, ideological, and structural. Each element entails several sub-elements.¹ These elements of professionalisation are constructed as

¹ The following sub-categories of Harries-Jenkins (1979) have been used as the starting point for our analyses: Specialisation; Centralisation; Standardisation: The contextual element is not included in the category system, as it functions as a means for our comparison. Of the five elements used, one category is created for each of the sub-elements. As a result, the category system consists of a total of seventeen categories. The categories are called the following: Goals of the occupational group; Role of the individual member; Occupational intelligence requirement; Basis of systematic theory; Institutionalised educational process; Length of the training; Cost of the training;

continua, which simultaneously turns the whole process into a continuum. Professionalisation, according to Harries-Jenkins (1970), is therefore a process that never reaches an end, nor a static (perfect) version of a profession.

To clarify further, the many elements are seen as possible, but not necessary, professionalisation dimensions. That is why a significant reduction in various empirical applications is to be expected. In Wimmer (2022) and Andreasson & Röing (2022), we have conducted first step analyses using all the sub-categories. In both the German and Swedish material, only the following three elements could be found, and these will structure this section on findings.

1. *Educational elements*: entrance requirements, body of knowledge; educational process
2. *Structural elements*: the nature of the group activity, and control; authority-sanctioned processes and control of non-occupational behaviour
3. *Ideological elements*: the professional self; group culture, status, socialisation process

Material

The material analysed to answer the research question comprises two main parts. In the first part the aim is to investigate the professionalisation of SEs in Germany from 2006 to 2021. This is accomplished by analysing relevant articles from the *Zeitschrift für Heilpädagogik* [Journal for Curative Education]. The journal will be abbreviated in the following as ZfH. ZfH is the journal of the German Association of special education (in the following, GASE), in German called *Verband Sonderpädagogik*. It is published on a monthly basis and both committed to the interests and concerns of its members and linked to scientific discourse. As the association members are mostly practitioners, it is assumed that the journal's content, following the stated commitment, reflects the current views and reflections of SEs in Germany. This conviction is further strengthened by the fact that the journal is financed through the association members, which currently number around 8,000. Following a purposive sampling strategy, the German sampling was carried out based on the research question and the theoretical perspective on professionalisation

Personality involvement; Sense of group identity; Group culture; Status; Socialisation process; Code of conduct; Evaluation of merit.

according to Harries-Jenkins (1970/2010), specifically the elements of professionalisation. After various identification rounds, 55 articles were considered appropriate for the analyses.

The basis for the investigation of the Swedish case is the professional journal *Specialpedagogik* [special education,], examined during the period 2007–2021. This is the voice of the Swedish Teachers' Associations' (in the following STA). This union was founded in 1991 by merging several teachers' organisations. It organises teachers and school leaders working in all types of schools in Sweden. Of its members, in 2021, 7,495 were special education teachers and special pedagogues. By comparison, the other trade union in the school sector, the Swedish Teachers' Association, organised 2,722 special education teachers. In 2024, both teacher trade unions merged.

The sampling method for the Swedish case was equivalent to the one for the German case, as described above; after several rounds of purposeful sampling, 113 articles remained in the Swedish sample. The larger number relates to the fact that the Swedish journal in focus is published more often during the year. However, the frequency has varied. The connotation under the citations refers to the year of publication and the issue number.

Findings

The dynamics of the German special education profession

The educational element

The base for the justification of the German SE's action is mainly established through the application of a systemic understanding of society, in which SE play an important role as it is they who work with pupils and the risk of exclusion, as expressed in the quote below:

Accordingly, it seems to make sense to emphasise the special role of (special) education for inclusive professionalisation from a systemic perspective. In this context, (special) education should not represent a domain of its own, and thus also not a discipline, but one (of several) qualifiable services for dealing with risks of exclusion' (Weisser, 2012, p. 48). In the future, it would, therefore, be a matter of identifying (special) educational expertise, i.e. dealing with social risks of exclusion, as a substantial aspect of educational professionalism and inclusive professionalisation (ibid., p. 63). (2012, p. 408)

To fulfil their important role, SE need a shared base of knowledge which forms part of their basis of systematic theory. In concrete terms, for example, it is reported that knowledge about augmentative and alternative communication has gained importance in the education of SEs. Otherwise, explicit examples for SE as a whole are rather absent. This point can be related to further findings on the other elements of professionalisation, which elaborate on the change in SEs' areas of responsibility and workplace. However, there are very specific ideas for expanding the knowledge basis, that is, about knowledge that SEs should acquire and that they have been lacking up to now. For example, medical and nursing knowledge should be given more space in the training of SEs (2013.4). Furthermore, they should be sensitised more to the topic of aggression (2014.2), and elsewhere it is suggested that sexuality and sex education should also be included in their education (2019.2) in order to add these areas to the profession's body of knowledge. A broad general direction can be discerned, which at its core is based on 'advocacy for people with a disability or disabled life' (2007.3, p. 168), and in order to fulfil the systemically based role it therefore requires

(...) well founded subject didactic knowledge, which is combined with special needs education knowledge about specific impairments and detailed knowledge about individual living conditions (child-environment analysis) and learning prerequisites (diagnostics). Only in this way can special needs [educators] meet the requirement of providing pupils with difficult learning conditions with individual support measures for the successful accomplishment of educational processes at school. (2018.3, p. 545)

Consequently, SE education is seen as in need of change. It is not only to be provided with some additional content, as already mentioned, but its entire structure should be changed. With regard to the obligation to work towards inclusive education environments in all general schools in Germany, it is noted that:

(...) a reformulation of the content requirements for the study of the subject of special needs education and a renewed revision of the framework agreement on the education and examination for a special needs education teacher's post seems to me indispensable, because the one-sided subject-scientific and subject-didactic location of special needs education training content must be understood as an act

of stabilising a two-track, general education school system of general schools and special schools. (2009.3, pp. 418–419)

SE education in its current form is thus seen as a supporting the divided school system in Germany, where general schools and special schools exist parallel to each other. Therefore, their training is viewed sceptically regarding the obligation to fulfil inclusion. This apprehension is repeated in the contextual analysis of the journal articles evaluated (e.g., 2012.1). Another reason for changing the education of SEs is the UN CRPD (2011.1), which can be seen as related to the claim for inclusion. The proposals for improved education are often described in terms of specific specialisations, such as those for a federal state, and can be roughly divided into two camps: either the content of the education should be changed (e.g., 2013.2, 2013.4, 2015.6), or the education should have a common structure with other teacher education programmes (e.g., 2012.1, 2013.1). These two camps can be well illustrated by the following two quotes. The conviction that there should no longer be a separate education for SEs, which can be shown in the first quote, uses the example of the recommendation for teacher education in Berlin:

All teachers should be trained for the school-based implementation of inclusive education. Since SEs will increasingly be deployed in general schools, they are no longer to be trained in an independent special education programme, but in a major ‘special education/rehabilitation science’, which is integrated into the degree programmes ‘teaching at primary schools’, ‘teaching at integrated secondary schools and grammar schools’ and ‘teaching at vocational schools’. (2013.1, p. 187)

The second camp claims that, on the contrary, a separated education for SEs is explicitly necessary:

The fact of the variety of tasks (...) for SEs points to the need for a reorientation of teacher education towards the qualifications actually required. These tasks require a large amount of time and specialisation in terms of content. In this context, an independent, undergraduate study of special needs education can be helpful, which gives sufficient space to these new and specific tasks of special needs teachers for the success of inclusive education ([...]). (2013.2, p. 201)

When viewed over time, the critique of independent SE education is ebbing away. However, it is still considered important that the training should

empower educators to implement inclusive education, where inclusion as a whole becomes important for SEs and general teachers.

The structural element

In this element, first of all, standards for specific SE jobs come up, such as the mobile special educational services (2006.1), or certain specialisations of special needs education, as in the example below concerning the specialisation of emotional and social disorders:

The specifications of the recommendations of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz) thus develop an ideal standard of teaching in the special focus of emotional and social disorders, which is characterised by – more cooperative social forms, – more student-oriented lesson planning and – innovative didactic concepts ('open teaching', action-oriented teaching, project work). (2009.1, p. 133)

Here, the standard takes a normative form and is established from the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz, in the following abbreviated as KMK), thus from state authorities. The standards for the work of SEs often seem to be set by the state, either by the KMK, as in the example above, and thus for SEs nationwide, or by the state in the form of a federal state, whereby the standards are then only valid for the SEs in one state.

Next to the state, also GASE aims to set standards for SE, but here, the state is involved, as pointed out in article 2007.4:

The working group [Standards Working Group of the special education Association] has the mandate to formulate minimum standards for special needs education. This mandate goes back to a motion of the state delegates of Bavaria at the general meeting in 2003, which had the aim of ensuring that conditions are ensured in special schools and in joint teaching by formulating minimum standards, which make targeted and sufficiently intensive special educational support possible for pupils with corresponding support needs. (2007.4, p. 422)

In this example, GASE is creating standards on behalf of a federal state. What is not mentioned are nationwide and, at the same time, cross-specialisation

standards for the work of SEs. However, there is also scepticism about standardising the work of SE concerning already existing standards, especially the standards represented by GASE. Those are seen in some regards as 'unfortunately not yet very concrete' (2008.1. p. 218), or problematic in the chosen way of controlling special educational work according to the output (2007.4, p. 425). From 2012 onwards, the discussion about existing or emerging standardisation seems to dissipate, after there is talk of an intensifying crisis of legitimacy in the aftermath of the UN CRPD:

The demands for an inclusive education system emanating from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (...) reinforce the ongoing crisis of the legitimacy of (special) education. (2012.5, p. 404)

After that, attention is drawn to the lack of standards (e.g., in 2018.2). As a consequence, at one point it is demanded that SEs should document their work in special schools, which is, according to GASE seen by the SE themselves as too much additional work:

Accountability for one's own special needs work is thus new for special needs [educators] and fits into the increased external control and documentary duty of all teachers that has been in place for the last 20 years or so (whereas regular accountability has been common in social work for a long time). The concerns of special [educators] about 'bureaucratisation' of their work can be interpreted as a concern about the time burden, as a misuse of their own profession, but also as a resistance to taking a closer look. (...) It is not too much of a challenge to use a simple, formalised procedure to regularly record the individual case-related and systemic activities (and the effects) of the SEs (of all special focuses) within the school and then to pass them on anonymously to the school supervision. (2016.1, p. 209)

Other findings show that differentiation between SE from teachers in general schools, and the cooperation of SEs with other occupational groups, are the big topics. Hereby, the distinction of tasks from the different occupational groups is mostly seen as too unclear. As already indicated, the issue of task division is closely linked to the cooperation of the different groups. Thus, the imprecise distribution of tasks is seen as a problem for successful cooperation

between SEs and general teachers in an inclusive setting. The following quote points out this concern very clear:

In particular, the distribution of roles and tasks causes many uncertainties and thus a great potential for conflict due to the variety of design options [...]. This is reinforced by the fact that roles and tasks for general and SEs as well as school social workers in inclusive settings are not clearly defined. (2021.1, p. 166).

The ideological element

For the ideological element, the findings present a far smaller scope than the one for the educational and structural elements. Regarding a coherent group culture of SEs, the earlier findings indicate a disappearance of a unified standpoint regarding social values and fundamental beliefs (2009.4, 2010.1). One observation of this states that:

Professional ethical aspects are currently pushed back by a concept of competence that, at best, refers to the cognitively oriented problem-solving ability of professionals. (...) Fundamental socio-critical and ideology-critical questions of the discipline are now to be discussed in the special education fields and can thus only be considered marginally. (2010.1, p. 446)

Indeed, some ideal images of SEs based on the concept of competence are given, as it is also based on the education standards movement. For instance, medical care (2013.4) or counselling, coordination, and team-process competencies (2013.5) are mentioned. Besides this critique, there is more talk of a lack of uniformity in the profession. The fragmentation of the group along the lines of specialisations is already mentioned in the previous quotation (2010.1). In essence, the feeling of group identity seems to manifest itself in the demarcation from (other) education groups, such as general teachers:

If one asks about the special nature of the educator, it must be emphasised that there is no difference in principle but only a difference in degree between him and the teacher at general schools, which is expressed merely, but nevertheless decisively, in the different perspective. The SE is the one who feels responsible for disturbed, impeded learning and development processes of individual children and who endeavours to take pedagogical-educational and, if necessary, therapeutic action with appropriate competence to act. (2011.1, p. 59)

The dividing lines along the specialisations remain so that, in the end, there is no uniform feeling of group identity. In addition, the identity of the SEs appears depending on the specific school they are working in. For example, it is described that the professional self-image of SEs for language impairments is strongly linked to the concept of the school where they work (2008.2) or that the role of SE depends on the respective school (2021.1). In addition, negative images of general teachers expressed by SEs can be caused by ambiguities in the division of tasks and the understanding of roles, that is, points that concern cooperation between the professional groups.

The dynamics of the Swedish special education profession(s)

The education elements

The analysis begins with the 2007 government decision to reintroduce special education teacher training in parallel to the existing special pedagogue programme. The event is framed in 2007 and 2008 by discussions in which the benefits of the introduction from the viewpoint of the state's interests are set concerning the STA, which has an ambivalent perspective on the change. The state's interest is to meet the criticism directed at the special pedagogue programme, stating that it has been overly academised and, thereby, lost its practical relevance (see Chapter 2). STA puts forward shortcomings in the anchoring of the role of the newly implemented special education teacher in schools and municipalities. STA believes that school management and teacher colleagues will expect special education teachers to work with individuals and small groups as special needs teachers have done in the past. In other words, the new professional group will lead to a decrease in inclusive education efforts in Swedish schools.

Moreover, STA also believes that the new special needs teacher training will lack legitimization since its re-emergence can be seen as a reaction to a non-functioning special pedagogue programme. On the other hand, STA reports on the insecurities of 'older' professionals during these years.

Now that the new programmes for special education teachers and special pedagogues have started, we 'old' people need to review what we have in our baggage. [...] There is confusion about the competence of us 'old' SEs, but especially of special education teachers (2009.1, p. 63).

Articles from 2012 present the National Agency for Higher Education's investigation into the actual need for two special education programmes, which the government commissioned at the end of 2011. There was criticism that the programmes are too similar in their design and content, which results in uncertainty for both the professions and employers. The journal cites the Minister for Education of this time, Jan Björklund:

When you look at the degree programmes, they are relatively similar. We want to know whether there is a need for specific special education teacher training or whether a special education programme with different specialisations is sufficient (2012.1, p. 8).

However, the government is apparently dealing with two opposing goals. On the one hand, it must clarify the two professional programme groups' overlapping degree objectives. On the other hand, there is a need to increase the number of applicants and thus the special education competence in the organisations. According to STA, the possible closure of the special pedagogue programme is causing concern among programme staff and questions among students. Moreover, at several higher education institutions, there are empty places, while at others, the places are filled.

The number of applicants for the special education programmes in Malmö and Umeå has dropped by around a third, one reason being that the government is considering closing the programme. / ... / In Linköping the feeling is rather the opposite among the students compared to Malmö. / ... / They [the students] want to hop on the train while they can (2012.1, p. 4).

As a result of the investigation, the Swedish Higher Education Authority recommends closing the special education programme and instead introducing a special education focus within the special education teacher training, a decision that the Union supports. However, despite the recommendation and positive attitudes towards this from many SE stakeholders, the government decided that the special education programme can continue. The decision was perceived by STA representatives as 'a U-turn' (2013.1, p. 4). Both programmes must indeed remain to meet the great need for professionals in the field, but now the two overlapping programmes no longer appear to be a problem for STA.

It is made clear that the reason for this shift is a severe shortage of SEs of any type in Swedish schools. In this situation, it is not considered an option to close or significantly change the SE programmes. To solve the shortage of special education teachers and SEs, the solution is instead to try to recruit students through a premium of SEK 50,000 upon completion of the programme. In combination with this, the government is introducing 350 new places in the special education teacher training programme in response to the great need for SE teachers, since the programme has been dormant for a number of years. In addition, an extra SEK 2 billion is being invested to employ more special education teachers and special pedagogues. STA is in favour of such initiatives but makes additional claims:

The seriousness of the situation is finally being recognised, but what is really needed is a real increase in wages (2014.1, p. 4).

All this notwithstanding, the special pedagogue programmes at Swedish universities shall not grow in size. The focus must be set on special education teacher programmes, and 2017 witnessed the introduction of the so-called 'special education Teacher Lift' (*Speciallärarlyftet*) campaign. The 'lift' is a big state intervention, offering continuing education opportunities for teachers to provide further training for special education teachers. The measures taken are gradually increasing the number of applicants and active special education teacher students. The significant growth of the SE-teacher group is actualised again by the question of whether one or two SE education programmes are the best option for the profession and its mission. However, no concrete suggestions are made, and the responsibility for defining the missions is placed on the school organisations.

The first step is to find out what the needs of the schools are, i.e. what kind of learning problems these specially trained teachers have to deal with. Then you have to study what the different professional categories do today. And then you have to look at the programmes and ask yourself: do they meet the needs and practice? (2018.3, p. 10)

This strategy is not without problems, however. According to STA, there is the fact that principals often have an unclear conception of who should do what.

This leads to both special education teachers and special pedagogues being forced to adopt an individualistic approach with a focus on compensatory, special education measures. This approach is also seen as the state's ambition for future special education services in the Swedish school:

The association opposes the government's view of children in difficulties. The wording gives the impression that the problems always lie with the pupil. This one-sided focus on the individual can lead to the emergence of the old type of special education conducted in 'clinics'. (4/2007, p. 51)

To make a long story short, all the discussions about the problems of two SE educations the related SE groups in Swedish schools are much ado about nothing. Both programmes still exist. Apparently, STA has had no impact on this matter. Instead, in 2017, a new subject popped up in the discussions, namely the government is proposing a significant increase in knowledge of neuro-psychiatric disabilities (NPF) in both programmes. It is proposed that the new subject will cover 15 credits of the programme's 90 credits and that it will be up to each higher education institution to design the content so that the new requirements are met. Hence, both programmes become even more alike. Moreover, this neuro-psychiatric shift strengthens more medical practices in special education. STA is indifferent to this rather big shift in Swedish special education. It only reports the problems, but not the impossibilities, of the universities to change the programmes according to the new standards.

We breathed from the beginning but also saw it as an opportunity to develop the courses. / ... / We have tried to find broad expertise within the university and cooperated with the Department of Psychology. / ... / All investigative tasks in the programme include this area. We are also recruiting staff with didactic experience (2019.1, p. 6–7).

The structural element

The Swedish material reveals a pattern of a movement towards being part of the school's management team or even having a position that involves working as both a principal and special education teacher. Consequently, SEs of both types appear to be moving towards the centre of the organisation or towards central, municipality-wide teams. Moreover, the special education

teacher is increasingly used as a facilitator when the principal wants to implement changes in working methods, which also seems to create tensions in the workplace as well.

[Teachers] think that you [the SE] underestimate their abilities ... and feel reduced to delivering their lesson content in a template (2020.4, p. 17).

Combined positions in the form of SEs/deputy principals were first described in the journal in 2017. In addition to combined positions, special pedagogues and special education teachers are emphasised as a recruitment base for school leadership positions as the organisation automatically receives the special education competence required by the Education Act. One advantage highlighted by the union is that the school then has a management team with expertise in special education. In one case, the school leaders' union (which also belongs to the Swedish teacher union) points out possible disadvantages of such a position:

One moment, you are a special needs teacher supervising colleagues, and the next, you are setting the salaries of the same people or deciding their schedules. (2017.3, p. 10)

The move to the centre and growing importance comes, nevertheless, with a price. The mission of SE in Swedish schools grows constantly in relation to the constantly growing number of tasks. That is why STA expresses an ambition to standardise and legitimise the roles of the SE in schools. The suggestion made is to authorise SEs exclusively to provide special support. Moreover, providing special support would be the major focus of the SE professions. However, even these claims ebbed away. Again, the responsibility for defining the profession's mission is put in others' hands. The superior role of the principals is accepted, and thereby, a fragmentation of the professions' mission.

[It] is the principal, as the person ultimately responsible for the individual education programmes, who can decide whether the person providing the specific support has the right skills (2018.3, p. 30).

The most recent dynamics displayed in the Swedish material concern the SE's role in the pupils' health work. STA wishes for the Education Act to specify

that the SE professions shall be a mandatory part of the student health service. The Education Act only specifies that the student health service shall include staff with special educational competence, not certified SEs (SFS 2010:800). STA highlights two reasons for legislating on the issue: partly the change in the Education Act would increase and ensure special educational competence, and partly it would increase the attractiveness and recruitment of specialised professions, as this would imply an increased need for special teachers/SEs. Indeed, in 2023, the Education Act was changed accordingly, yet the consequences remain to be seen.

The ideological element

The special education professions in Sweden make few collective demands. However, a common denominator is the described lack of clarity about their expected tasks as it often becomes a matter of demand and negotiation by the individual SE or special education teacher at the local school. As described earlier, since the mission of the SE is seldom well defined, their job situations can result in the professions often being used to fill in gaps in the organisation, such as becoming a substitute teacher or performing other tasks on short notice. It is relatively common for SEs and special education teachers to lack a job description. STA emphasises the importance of creating their own job descriptions since big local differences in tasks and assignments characterise the professions. One article captures the frequent lack of job descriptions for SEs and special education teachers:

There was a rush when Jennie Johansson offered to share her job description in a group on social media. Everyone wanted it! (2018.3, p. 34)

Throughout the articles, the two professional groups are described separately; there is rarely any notion of a specialised profession that encompasses common conditions and tasks for both professions. In contradiction, the actual work tasks of the special education professions are described as more similar than different, both from the perspective of the professional groups and from the school organisations. In the journal, special education teachers and special pedagogues often report on the difficulties of separating tasks but equally often report the willingness to cooperate across professional group

boundaries. Although a collective group identity is absent, the groups work closely together towards the same goals and are each other's closest colleagues.

The special pedagogue and the special education teacher at Old-City-School would rather emphasize similarities than differences. They have the same goals, but slightly different tasks (2018.3, p. 20).

From the employers' point of view, it is evident that the professional roles are merging and that the tasks assigned and performed are often exactly the same for special pedagogues and special education teachers. This phenomenon is often present in the recruitment phase in job advertisements, rarely specifically targeted at one of the specialised professions.

The roles of special education teachers and special pedagogues can merge in schools. / ... / - Job advertisements often seek for a 'special education teacher/special pedagogue' (2011.4, p. 10).

The fact that the professional claims lie on an unclear foundation becomes an even more complex issue when the local organisations become catalysts for dilemmas related to the profession. The professionals at the management levels in individual schools must discuss every mission. Moreover, according to STA, the employer makes decisions on an uncertain basis about which individual professional should perform what.

Yes, it's reassuring to know that there is such a shortage. At the same time, when I read job adverts, I can feel that principals can't really distinguish between the tasks of a special education teacher and a SE. That you have to consider what you want to do and present it when you apply for a job (2017.3, p.34).

Principals who recruit SEs are sometimes clear that the person hired must be flexible enough to fill in where needed, for example, with individual teaching or in small groups, even though this is not part of the education of the SEs.

Against the backdrop of all these problems of unclear boundaries and an ambiguous mission, the STA concentrates on putting forward the big value of SEs for the school organisation. Both groups are presented with how they try to bring about changes and find solutions in all kinds of complex situations. This can be about finding completely new solutions and making a difference for pupils at risk, but there are also several examples of SEs who have designed new special education methods to deal with intractable problems:

They soon realised that there were no proven methods to rely on when working with pupils who refuse to go to school, so they decided to develop their own method (2013.2, p. 20).

This positive picture can, at times, become even more colourful by discussing the relations between SEs and general teachers. The journal describes a belief that the SE profession has the ability to solve many important problems for teachers, problems that teachers themselves may not be aware of. The profession is also claimed by STA to be a kind of regulatory body in relation to teachers' workload and work ethic.

We could set boundaries for what is feasible to manage as a teacher; you become a bit homebound when you are in a group, and they [the teachers] may stretch their boundaries (2017.3, p. 35).

There are also plenty of examples in the articles of pupils and management valuing the special education professions. One pupil describes how the support he received from a special education teacher during a problematic time at school saved his life. Consequently, the STE nurtures this picture of SE as an all and always problem-solver.

Now Kenneth Jansson / ... / becomes someone you reach for when things simply don't work out. -Send him to Kenneth, it has become a catchphrase [sic] (2016.2, p. 14).

Putting forward the need to let SEs have great flexibility in their individual schools connotes this role, which is the profession's problem-solver character. There are also recurring descriptions of situations where special education teachers or pedagogues resolve different dilemmas with a favourable outcome. There are many examples of cases where special needs professionals face a situation that requires a creative solution and the design of a local model to achieve the objectives.

As 'agents of change' in the school, SEs need room for flexibility and should, therefore, not be as timetabled as special education teachers (2009.1, p. 6).

However, this positive picture has also become increasingly problematic in recent years. There are descriptions of problems with a lack of colleagues, a lack of time and a stressful work situation that may be due to an excessive

number of pupils, and solutions that arise sometimes seem to come from random situations. The articles do not describe the underlying problems but only focus on how the special education professions must manage to work their magic under impossible conditions. For example, one special education teacher who is alone at the school and has two miles to the nearest professional colleague describes how it is difficult to be able to keep up with all the tasks:

It is what it is, and you must make the best of the situation. I really enjoy the role I have (2018.3, p. 37).

Concerning the ambivalent situation of SE, it seems that the STA's narrative purpose is much about raising the morale of the SE profession. The union seems to have limited power to change the prevailing conditions in the workplace, and therefore the magazine takes a pragmatic approach to the situation, showing examples where the individual solves various problematic situations through some kind of 'magic'. Moreover, the organisation's testimonies from politicians and principals are presented regarding the unique competence of the specialised professions and the great need for them in the organisation. However, this does not seem to lead to greater professionalisation, as the voices from the profession testify to relatively low status of unreasonable claims when it comes to the possibility of saying no or stopping.

Conclusion

The most relevant conclusion in this chapter is that the context plays a crucial role in the professionalisation of SEs. When comparing the SE professions, the particularities of the cases become visible in the contexts of time and space. In addition to the context of the school system, the potential impact of inclusion as a global educational trend also becomes apparent, and how inclusion is to be realised by a particular school system has significant influence on the SEs in the system. This happens not only indirectly via the school system but also directly in the professions and their understanding of themselves, their knowledge, and their role. Comparing the findings reveals several small similarities, but mainly differences. Similarities could be found in the structural element; the commonality is that there is a shift in the position within the organisation of the school in both countries. In Sweden, this

concerns the position of SEs, who are increasingly moving into the centre of the organisation. In Germany, the shift is of an even greater magnitude. Here, the whole profession is supposed to shift its mission from the special to the general school. In both cases, this change brings uncertainty about the exact position taken by professionals. This also concerns the exact tasks carried out by the profession, as these are related to the respective position. In connection to this, the formal education of SEs in Germany and Sweden is also discussed. In the Swedish context, the discussion revolves around the questioned necessity of two training programmes for one profession, resulting in two professional groups with similar missions. In the German context, the structure and content of formal education are in focus. There are expectations to change it in a way that allows SEs to contribute to the implementation of inclusive education in schools, that is, away from their traditional workplace in special schools.

In both contexts, the education of SEs does not ultimately depend on the profession itself. Still, it is conditioned by the needs of the school organisation in relation to the realisation of inclusive education. However, in both contexts, there are very different approaches to inclusion. The Swedish school system operates with an inclusive one-track approach, and the German school system with a segregated two-track approach; consequently, the implications and considerations for change are very different in practice. The difference in the systems and their implementation of inclusion are also reflected in the other points of the professionalisation processes. While SEs in Sweden are recognised as part of the general school, the profession struggles with the internal differentiation between its two professional groups, which are not distinguished from the outside. For SEs in Germany, this position has yet to be consolidated. In this context, the different specialisations of SEs are also presented as problematic. However, it is still described in the German journal that SE do not perceive themselves as a whole but divide themselves into different groups along the different specialisations. Moreover, because the specialisations seem to be of little relevance for their work in the general school, they are regarded from the outside as a group that is supposed to be responsible for one area.

However, the differentiations regarding disability clearly do not group results in the magnitude of the problems described for Swedish SE and their unclear distinction between special education teachers and special

pedagogues. Due to several reforms, the two SE groups active in Swedish schools are very similar in their mission but have different names (Wermke, Höstfält & Magnusson, 2024). To make a long history short, concerning the reform intention, special education teachers are supposed to work closely with students in need of special support inside and outside the classroom. In comparison, special pedagogues are assumed to work at the organisational level of schools and municipalities, for example, by systematically removing barriers to inclusive education (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, since both the names and definitions of both groups are so cloudy, practical distinctions for school administration, principals, teachers, pupils and parents in the schools have been difficult, and since it has not been clear what exactly to expect from the respective group, the pragmatic name of Swedish SE in practice has, in many contexts, become a special education teacher/special pedagogue.

Another aspect of the data is the relation SE have to other professional groups in the general school. The biggest problem described in the material for SEs in Germany is their distinction from teachers who already have an established position in the general school. Here, the structure of the organisation and the implementation of inclusion are widely discussed. It is the form of the German school as an organisation that makes it difficult to create a clear position for SEs. Both the problems of being recognised as specialists for very particular disabilities and having no defined place in the organisation of the general school apparently lead to a belief that the German SE must shift its focus from working with individual pupils towards more work with all actors in the school, that is, more work in general than work with the pupils. This claim would make their role more similar to that of the Swedish SEs, that is, as generalists.

In this scenario, the cooperation with other occupational groups, mainly teachers, and the tasks of the group appear as important. In earlier research, the cooperation with other teachers is also discussed in regard to the structure of their education, which is described as allowing little cooperation with other teacher education programmes, and it is stated that the lack of cooperation within the education programmes can lead to the different groups having a lower understanding of each other (Grosche & Lindmeier, 2020). Here, a very important difference comes into play in relation to Sweden. The SEs in Sweden need previous education as teachers before they can join the special education programme. Thus, they are all teachers from the start, which means

that the Swedish teachers in compulsory schools and the SEs share a common educational background, and the SEs know the group of general teachers as they were previously members of this group. In addition, cooperation with other groups in the workplace, already practised in Sweden, can benefit from cooperation with fewer conflicts and the reduction of conflicting goals for the different groups (Neumann, 2019).

In addition, our material shows that Swedish SEs move into school management positions in the school organisation. There is even a trend where SEs are being recruited into school management positions or even positions at the municipal level. In some cases, SEs or special education teachers are actively recruited to principal positions in order to gain special educational competence in school management and pupil health care, which in itself leads to a shortage of special education competence in the municipality and has a negative effect on the professionalisation of the special professions. Since the profession is used for tasks other than those intended, the profession's group culture is weakened, where the special professions can be used for anything important to the school organisation.

In the end, it is the school administration or principals who decide on the mission of the individual SE and special education teacher in context.

The results of this study show, in accordance with Ramberg (2015) and Magnússon et al. (2018), that the presence of special education teachers and SEs significantly differs between municipal and independent schools, and also among various municipalities. SE and their union apparently have little to say about the dissolution of boundaries in professional work tasks. Instead, a significant part of the Swedish material draws attention to the mission and tasks of the professions, not in the perspective of cause and effect but in a more declarative and moralising way. When the unclear situation regarding tasks and duties is instead posed in relation to an ideological element within the concept of professionalisation, the result becomes more comprehensive and directed towards consequences with aspects valuable for the development and professionalisation of the professions. Many ambiguities surrounding the professions have become, for the individual special education teacher and the special pedagogue, a question concerning the lack of a common culture. A shift towards improvement for SE in practice by formulating clearer claims and a clearer mission definition is largely absent. The problem of the ambiguous conditions of the specialised professions

looks much the same from year to year, although it differs between variations in the individual school and municipal contexts.

Finally, a lack of trade union fights is also evident in the Swedish material. Instead, the STA journal presents a large number of examples where specialised professions solve various dilemmas despite insufficient conditions. According to Harries-Jenkins (1970/2010), less self-criticism within the profession indicates a decrease in professionalisation. The journal *Journalisten* highlights how the STA journals, starting in 2017, have taken several steps to reduce self-criticism within the Union itself. This is mostly visible in the fact that the task of reviewing articles was completely outsourced in 2019 and is now produced by an external profit-oriented content agency (Nesser, 2018; Granström, 2019).

References

Granström, K. (2019). Bara tre journalister vid Lärarförbundets tidningar följer med till contentbyrån [Only three journalists at Teachers' Union newspapers join the content agency] | *Journalisten*. <https://www.journalisten.se/nyheter/bara-tre-journalister-vid-lararförbundets-tidningar-följer-med-till-contentbyran>

Grosche, M., & Lindmeier, C. (2020). Lehrerinnen- und Lehrerbildung für ein sonderpädagogisches Lehramt [Teacher training for a special needs teaching profession]. In C. Cramer, J. König, M. Rothland, & S. Blömeke (Eds), *Handbuch Lehrerinnen- und Lehrerbildung* [Teacher training handbook] (pp. 263–268). UTB.

Harries-Jenkins, G. (1970/2010). Professionals in organisations. In J. A. Jackson (Ed.), *Professions and professionalization* (pp. 51–103). Cambridge University Press.

Magnússon, G., Göransson, K., & Nilholm, C. (2018). Varying access to professional, special educational support: A total population comparison of special educators in Swedish independent and municipal schools. *Journal of Research in special educational Needs*, 18(4), 225–238.

Nesser, J. (2018). Striden om lärtidningarna [The battle for teachers' magazines] | *Journalisten*. <https://www.journalisten.se/nyheter/striden-om-larartidningarna>

Ramberg, J. (2015). Special education in Swedish upper secondary schools: Resources, ability grouping and organisation. Stockholm University.