8. Power and inclusion. German and Swedish special educators' work in general schools

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Introduction

In the course of the twenty-first century, there has not been an agreement in national and international contexts on the most critical tasks of special education professions in school inclusion (Labhart, 2019; Mathews et al., 2017; Magnusson & Göransson, 2018; Magnússon et al., 2019; Hillebrand et al., 2013; Szwed, 2007). The work of special educators (SEs) varies both within and across countries, even historically (Göransson et al., 2015; 2017; Klang et al., 2017). SEs' work is a rich and highly complex field, and emphasising various profiles shows how SE support can be organised in different ways. The understanding and operationalisation of the inclusion contingent (Wermke et al., 2020), depending on at least spatial factors, is the argument of the chapter at hand, as various nation-specific particularities relate to different power relations in general schools operationalising inclusive education related to possible inclusive tasks and task profiles for SEs.

Against this backdrop, this chapter will investigate and compare German and Swedish SEs' perspectives on working with children with special needs in general, and that implies inclusive schools. We aim to illuminate different ways of organising the inclusion work of SEs in our two national contexts. Due to significant similarities and differences between both school systems, a focus on the national contexts of Sweden and Germany is especially interesting. Both national cases share significant similarities as democratic, Western, and meritocratic school systems, and both aim to fulfil the Salamanca Declaration from 1994 as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) from 2006. Moreover, both have the ambition to achieve

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a genuinely inclusive school and society for all. Historically, the education systems in Sweden and Germany have similar roots, but they have developed very differently over the last decades (Barow & Östlund, 2020). The Swedish comprehensive school system, long characterised by a decreasing number of special schools, is contrasted by an ability-tracked school with a highly developed special school system in Germany.

Research has shown various inclusive configurations and various task profiles, providing insights into how the work of SEs is organised in inclusive schools. Lütje-Klose and Neumann (2018), following Hillenbrandt et al. (2013) and Heinrich et al. (2014), distinguish between three different task profiles SE can have. The first relates to *personalised-additive services*. Here, SEs provide individual and group-related support measures mainly or exclusively in external differentiation. This results in a division of labour, whereby the general teacher is primarily responsible for the students without special needs, and the pupils with special needs often fall entirely under the responsibility of the SE (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018). Thus, support for individual students can be assumed to be something 'additional', leading to no adjustments and preventive measures for the whole class, whereby at the same time, the classification of students in need of support increases to secure (personnel) resources.

Distinct from the task profile mentioned above are two configurations that result from *institutionalised system-related services* and which thus shift the focus from remote support. In these contexts, Reiser (1998) distinguishes between SEs who work as 'co-teachers', whereby special needs education is practised through double staffing in the classroom. Co-teaching in common lessons is thus done on an equal basis, where the different actors (SEs and general teachers) embody experts in different fields. On the other hand, the special education resource (person) is system-related since they are considered 'part of the regular group of teachers and is not only used for additive support of individual students' (Reiser, 1998). This kind of task profile is probably one of the most important in inclusion work in schools. Nevertheless, it is still rarely applied in schools in Europe today (see, for example, Dietze et al., 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2020).

The third task profile, also related to the institutionalised system-related service, deals with special educational diagnostics, support planning, and

consultation. Here, SEs no longer work specifically close to children but rather for the children (Kearns, 2005). As a result, direct guidance in the classroom recedes into the background. Instead, the special education teacher tries to activate the knowledge of internal or external stakeholders (Reiser, 1998). On the one hand, this type of SE support reduces the possible stigmatisation due to a diagnosis. However, it also prevents the often desired 'direct' intervention or help from regular teachers (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018).

Methodology

For the work presented in this chapter, we interviewed 20 Swedish SEs and 25 German SEs, all working in general schools. All interviewees were experienced and fully educated SEs. All had considerable experience of working in inclusive school settings. Since this article only pays attention to the aggregated perspective of SE in both countries, variables other than country are not reported. All interviews were conducted via the communication program ZOOM. Our interview questions concerned 1) the most common work tasks and roles of SE in inclusive schools (e.g., *What are the main tasks of SEs in your school?*); 2) practices of special educational need assessment and provision (e.g., *What happens, when it is observed that a particular student is at risk? What determines SEN provision in your school?*); and 3) the relation of SE to others in the inclusive school, such as teachers and members of the school management (e.g., *Can you describe your relation to regular classroom teachers? How does the school management support your work?*).

The interviews were conducted by the authors of this chapter, along with two students, in the SEs' native languages (Swedish and German). These were then transcribed and translated into Swedish (the common language of the project group). Afterward, the interview transcripts were analysed following a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, thematic areas or patterns were identified that underlie this qualitative data. This form of qualitative analysis is not bound to any specific theory. This procedure allowed patterns to be traced across the complete data set, and the interviews could then be analysed deductively and inductively. The article's first and foremost aim is the illustration of how SE interrelation with contextual conditions *can* be. The study at hand is qualitative with the ambition to make analytical

generalisations on the nature of SE professions from a comparative perspective, with this offering conceptual contributions that could be validated in further empirical studies at scale. The thematic pattern we have found is presented in the result section as an analytical matrix.

German and Swedish special educators' perspective on working in general schools

Understanding and describing the multidimensionality in working with inclusion

Special education work in inclusive schools can be understood and explained in relation to various dimensions related to each other, levels as well as domains. The interviews revealed a large intersection of significant factors for shaping inclusive practices, and largely determined them. Consequently, we argue for understanding the operationalisation of the work in inclusive schools alongside different levels and domains. This section presents a multi-dimensional matrix building on our thematic analyses. The multidimensionality of their work enables the interviewed SEs to move or act simultaneously at either one or even several levels: the individual (student), group (classroom/lesson), and school level. At the individual level, all aspects relevant to inclusion associated with the individual are discussed. The group level, however, deals with aspects of inclusion in the classroom or immediate lessons, whereas the school level represents the individual school as an arena. Furthermore, SEs act in different domains or areas dealing with inclusive practices. These are the educational, social, and administrative domains. In the educational domain, SEs deal with activities and responsibilities associated with teaching and learning, while the social domain claims all interactions with the teaching staff, parents, or students. Lastly, the administrative domain handles administrative activities. Table 8.1 summarises and illustrates the multidimensionality of inclusive work of SEs.

As for the pedagogical domain, at an individual level, the SEs, for instance, remarked that this was '*adjusting worksheets or examinations for my children*' *(German SE)* or '*supporting and working with students during lessons either inside or outside the classroom*' *(Swedish SE)*. Considering the group level, comments

such as *'with one colleague I am trying to team-teach, the other ones either want me to stay in the classroom supporting him/her or take my student out and do separate schooling' (German SE)* emerged. A characteristic remark from the administrative domain at the school level might be, *'every school is obligated by law to have SE competence available. However, it is up to the principal to decide if you work as a special teacher or a special pedagogue. Resulting in different tasks – do I have to train teachers or not'. (Swedish SE).* In the German context, however, it might rather be, *'I have many meetings with different colleagues discussing how to implement inclusion in his/her class. With everyone, it is different since inclusion is not clearly defined'. (German SE).* This last statement can be assigned to the social domain at the classroom level.

Since SEs work at the different levels and domains in which inclusion is practised, their profession is necessarily affected, something we develop further below.

Table 8.1: The multidimensionality of inclusion operationalisation

Domain Level	Educational Domain	Social Domain	Administrative Domain
Individual level (student)	"Depending on how much time I get for the student I adapt his/her material for other classes as well. But mostly I do not have the time." (German SE) "Some of my students can work mostly with the class and I am just there to support, the others need more one-on-one during lessons." (Swedish SE)	"Some teachers find my student disruptive, that's why I take them outside." (German SE) "Some students feel overwhelmed in the whole class and therefore cannot concentrate. That's why I take them outside." (Swedish SE)	"Some schools manage to group students so I can bundle my weekly hours and the students get more time overall. However sometimes they are spread out in three or four class levels from which I have to collect them first." (German SE) "If a student reaches the third level, the action plan (IEP) comes to into play." (Swedish SE)

(Continued)

Table 8.1: (*Continued*)

Domain Level	Educational Domain	Social Domain	Administrative Domain
Group level (classroom/ lesson)	"With one teacher I team-teach, the other I support in the classroom, and with some teachers I take my child out of the class. […] Some teachers want my advice on lesson material and even prepare some for my students but some only depend on my material for those students and will not give me a heads up on what they are about to teach." (German SE) "If I have a student in class who is currently having a rough time concentrating/ learning etc. - no matter what reason - I take him/ her with me as well." (Swedish SE)	"Sometimes you get invited to a parental interview, sometimes not." (German SE) "With some colleagues who are in challenging situations with students, I get together in addition to the weekly meetings." (Swedish SE)	"It is very rare that my colleagues (regular teachers) want to go on a voluntary training with me. Probably because they would need a substitute teacher and because they see no point in it. Either way the school doesn't oblige them even though it is so useful." (German SE) "As a special teacher you always do the grading together with the regular teacher since both parties are equally involved." (Swedish SE)
School level	"We have to do quite a lot of weekly plan work with our assigned students. So the children are relatively free with what and how they want to work." (German SE) "As a special pedagogue you mostly train the teachers and work with school development" (Swedish SE)	"We have found a good solution for communication in my school. When someone needs me he/she puts a bracket on the desired period on my timetable." (German SE) "We also have our daily get together with the entire staff to plan things out. All teachers and SEs." (Swedish SE)	"Sometimes I have to switch my disability focus .i.e. I do support children with needs I have no education for" (German SE) "It is crazy even though I haven't studied English as a subject, I now have to teach English to my assigned children in some classes. How? I am not good at it." (Swedish SE)

Special educators' roles and power general schools

It becomes apparent that the multiplicity of security in the roles SEs can have in inclusive schools is very much related to the work of German SEs. A German special education teacher emphasises this:

> Inclusion is currently taking place without anything having been defined. There is nothing concrete yet, and nothing has been created. Each school can do that for itself. But also, within the school, there are too many different visions. We need a unified concept after everyone has to implement inclusion. (German SE)

This is because, in Germany, funding for inclusion is distributed on a person-by-person basis, which ties the German SE to a specific individual. This individual is again tied to most (subject) teachers who often share a different vision of inclusion and its practice. Due to the need for a systematic approach, there needs to be a uniform or structured use of special education competence for inclusion in Germany. German SEs in this study do not frequently work in an 'expert' or 'specialist' role' (Kearns, 2005). Our study shows that this specific role is mainly taken because of the limited time available – *'[…] I have a certain number of hours, and it's not set very high […]; sitting in class with every child [would not be beneficial]' (German SE).*

However, even the Swedish SEs take on this role quite frequently since Sweden's SEs traditionally work under the exceptional educational understanding of 'personalized additive service provision' and are thus considered 'specialists' or 'experts'.

However, as described above, internationally, recent studies have identified a shift toward the consultant task profile and away from the specialist one. This change cannot be noted clearly in the German case, even though some tasks such as adaptation, assessment of learning, and bureaucratic work can be identified in all interviews. This shift became apparent in the Swedish data since a group of SEs is trained for such organisational and school improvement tasks and for consulting internal and external stakeholders (Magnusson & Göransson, 2019).

Tasks related to co-teaching appear in Germany since joint teaching with the entire class is the goal all parties involved strive for. Nevertheless, the co-existence of different forms of the term co-teaching illustrates that different concepts could fall under the same name. As such, when German SEs work

next to the class teacher, they often do not teach in teams but attend the lesson without participating directly in the teaching and are instead assigned to support 'his/her' student if necessary. According to the interviews on the part of the Swedish SE, this role is practised only in very exceptional cases by the special teachers, mainly if the students to be assisted attend lower grades. In previous studies, this task profile has rarely appeared, and the same applies to tasks related to school improvement for German SEs. Such are present in previous studies or, indeed, in this study. In Sweden, however, such tasks can be formally realised by the SE specialising in organisational development.

Our study identified another task profile role based on comparing the two countries. It is identifiable within the Swedish data but utterly absent in German. Swedish SEs have an undisputed leadership role in inclusive schools. This is evident from the way they speak. German SEs communicate in a much more defensive way, referring to themselves as '*the teacher sitting near the radiator waiting*'. In contrast, Swedish SEs refer to themselves as the '*boss*'. Consequently, the Swedish SE has more discretion in deciding how to work or not work compared to counterparts in Germany, where their role is more dependent on the regular teachers and the SE's hourly workload. This is not surprising since the Swedish SEs are firmly anchored within the individual school, at the school level, and are certainly more present. German SEs, often with the status of '*traveling SEs*', are often absent, giving them less responsibility.

This relates to the context-specific meaning of factors that describe the role of SEs in inclusive schools. We present the differences in Table 8.1, showing the level and domain at which SEs situate the factors, cooperation, resources, flexibility, and attitude. To clarify, Figure 8.1 shows which level and domain German and Swedish SEs believe are the most important arenas for the work with inclusion. It does *not*, however, show where they are active, even if overlaps might exist.

As we have tried to portray by the use of two different colours, Swedish SEs see inclusion and its related aspects as situated in the organisation of the school, while their German colleagues relate their special education work merely to the individual classroom or even the individual student in need of special support. At least from the perspective of SE, inclusion must encapsulate the whole school, and is best characterised by an inclusive attitude and trans-professional cooperation.

Domain Level	Educational Domain	Social Domain	Administrative Domain
Individual level (student)	(dark grey)	(hatched)	
Group level (classroom/lesson)	(dark grey)	(dark grey)	(dark grey)
School level	(light grey)	(light grey)	(hatched)

Figure 8.1: Dimensions of the most essential inclusive activities and special education scopes of action for SEs in inclusion, regarding Swedish (light grey) and German (dark grey) SEs

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined German and Swedish SEs' considerations about the operationalisation of inclusion concerning students in need of special education support in regular schools. Both school systems differ significantly in their structures and therefore in their nation-specific prerequisites for making a genuine school for all. Germany is characterised by an ability-tracked, highly centralised and bureaucratic system, while Sweden presents a comprehensive school system with much autonomy at the local level.

Our analyses show that German and Swedish SEs speak about the work with inclusion in similar terms. In relation to this, several dimensions of this process become visible in their reasoning. Doing inclusion is a multi-dimensional endeavour. Firstly, it relates to different schooling domains. Our analyses suggest that inclusion must be or can be approached *educationally, socially*, or *administratively*. Moreover, inclusion is obviously handled and negotiated at various levels: at an individual level concerning the *individual* student in need of special support, at a g*roup* level concerning the inclusive classroom, and an *organisational* level concerning the inclusive school. In particular, such levels have also been presented in international research and are part of the sphere of professional knowledge of SEs (overview in Nilholm, 2012). More novel for research on inclusion is the conceptualisation of the domain-specific dimensions. Figure 8.1 presented an analytical matrix we developed based on our comparative data, and this matrix might be helpful for further studies on inclusion. In our comparative data material, the work on inclusion relates significantly to which power is attributed to SEs in the inclusive school.

Our comparative analyses show that Swedish and German SEs differ in their legitimacy among regular teachers and regarding a powerful mandate handed down by state policy and school leaders. Consequently, inclusive schools appear to be a more welcoming place for SEs in Sweden than in Germany. In the former context, they possess much more power to organise the work of doing and nurturing inclusion. From the perspective of our SEs from Germany and Sweden, we can confirm the strong statements of scholars such as Mel Ainscow (2020). A paradigm shift towards a genuine school for all will only evolve through ecological strategies considering the whole school organisation, and for this strong SEs working with inclusion are needed.

To qualify this, in Sweden, as shown in our context description, SEs are solely employed in their schools and today have, in many cases, leadership and school development roles. The appropriate work with students needing special support is highly prioritised by the Swedish school inspection today. This also relates to the fact that the operationalisation of inclusion is connected to achieving learning outcomes. The provision of special educational needs support draws on the individual right of a student to receive the support needed to achieve curriculum goals (Magnússon, 2015).

Moreover, school systems have a rapidly growing focus on standards and standardised testing in the aftermath of OECD PISA (Hamre, Morin, & Ydensen, 2018). This has resulted in increasing challenges for public education, where standards and standardisation have shifted school systems towards a strong emphasis on 'goal achievement for *all*'. We argue that such a close relationship between inclusion and assessment has at least resulted in prioritising students' special needs in education governance. By the same token, this has resulted in a high status of SEs in the Swedish school system. In addition, SEs in Sweden have often been experienced teachers who have undergone a graduate education in special education. This supports the high status of SEs in inclusive schools in relation to the regular teachers and the school management. This is not the case for SEs working in inclusive schools in Germany, however.

Another difference in the power of SEs relates to the nature of the school system as such. In Sweden, it is comprehensive, drawing on an ideology of *one* school for all children (Wermke et al., 2020). The tracked school system in Germany, building on the educational idea that learner groups must be as homogeneous as possible, pursues the idea of a suitable school for all. This might be a powerful, even purposeful, hindrance to inclusion. Furthermore, in Germany, as Pfahl and Powell (2011) have shown, SEs relate their professional status to a highly complex system of special schools and their sophisticated specialist training concerning various special educative categories. The regular school as a foundation for inclusion might as well be another world for German SEs, one focused on following rules and using another language. Indeed, as one German SE colleague expresses it in our data, 'My colleagues from the special school do not want work in inclusive settings. In inclusive settings you must subordinate yourself'.

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